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Prologue

If you'd asked me what my favourite month is before, I would have said May. It has golden week, and I get presents on children's day. The runner up is August, because it has summer vacation. Close behind that is December (Christmas presents) and January (New Year's money!) March, too, since that's when my birthday is.

Now that I'm a little older, I like October the best. It's not too hot or too cold, there's a few public holidays, the weather is still good, and there's lots of events going on. Most importantly, it's the time of year when rice tastes best. I love the way the air smells in October. The town turns red and yellow from the fall leaves. Seeing the carved pumpkins for Halloween always makes me hungry.

Yuriko Kougami was born on October 1st. She always mediates fights, helps us with homework, and makes me lunch twice a week. We want to do something special for her, so all three of us decide to throw her a surprise party. Azechi, Imai, and I tried to hold the party at Kougami's favourite pancake shop, but even after all of our careful planning, it fell through. Kougami, the guest of honour , isn't feeling well, and is stuck in bed. Apparently she's sick to her stomach. She hasn't been at school in nearly a week.

Imai is pretty disappointed about it all. He put in a lot of effort to put together a set of transparent fountain pens and colourful inks that Kougami wanted. Azechi got her some good quality cosmetics, and I got her favourite movie on DVD. I thought it was a shame we wouldn't be able to celebrate, but on the morning of her birthday, Azechi and Imai showed up at my house uninvited.

"I heard your house has an oven," Azechi says.

We only use it a few times a year, but it's true.

"She said she's starting to feel better, so I thought the three of us should make a chiffon cake to bring over!" Azechi actually wanted to do it alone, but… Her house only has a stovetop and a toaster "Besides, I've never baked by myself. If all three of us make it and it turns out bad, I can blame it on you two," Azechi says nonchalantly.

She's always like this. Since Imai is a slave to love, he doesn't mind baking a cake as long as it's for Kougami. My mom says that

we can do whatever we want, as long as we clean up after. Imai has two older sisters, and I used to help my grandparents bake when I was little, so the two of us end up doing most of the work. Even if she can't do much to help, we never would have thought to do this if it wasn't for Azechi. Baking with these two ends up being unexpectedly fun.

We bake two cakes; one for Kougami, and one for taste testing. It didn't puff up like it did in the video we watched, but it's still light and sweet like a vitamin castella. It's 100 times better than I expected. But a vitamin castella would be a lot more cost effective, and it doesn't really seem like a chiffon cake at all. It's nothing at all like the chiffon cakes at my usual tea shop. Regardless, we bring the cake over to Kougami's house as a surprise.

"Why…? I didn't even mention my birthday…" Kougami says in surprise. She must still be unwell, since her cheeks are red.

"Isozaki-sensei told me about birth flowers when I helped him with the flower beds at school. He used your birthday, October 1st, as an example."

The iris is my birth flower. In the language of flowers, it means "obligation" or "communication." Kougami's birth flowers are chrysanthemums and bush clovers. They represent integrity and thoughtfulness. Isozaki-sensei said that they were on brand for Kougami.

"You should have said something, there's no need to be shy. By the way, my birthday is December 12th and I'll be expecting presents," Azechi says. She never misses a chance to talk about herself.

"I'd love to celebrate with all of you, but… I actually… Don't feel up to it right now…" Kougami says weakly.

"Oh… Then you must not have much of an appetite yet. We baked you a chiffon cake, but…"

"What? Really? I'm fine, I think I can handle some."

"I'm glad. Azechi said she would make it, but Imai and I ended up doing most of the work."

"Shut up! I looked up the recipe and videos! Presents are more important, anyway!" Azechi pushes me out of the way and holds out

a paper bag.

"Wow…"

Kougami blushes as soon as she opens the bag. It's a set of body cream and hair lotion from Azechi's favourite brand. The bottle has a rose on it, and looks like it's for poison with its black, purple, and pink colour scheme. Kougami sniffs them, then rubs some into her hand and hair. The sweet scent of roses fills the living room.

"You said you liked this scent before, right?"

"Yeah, I do. The bottle is cute, too."

The scent is too strong for me, and I don't think the bottle is cute at all. Girls never cease to amaze me. Imai happily watches the two girls talk. Kougami's hair is always smooth and soft, even without hair lotion. I've always liked the gentle scent of her shampoo, too.

Eventually, Imai holds out his own paper bag and apologizes for getting in their way. "This is my present," he says almost inaudibly. His face is all red from being nervous.

"Thanks… I wonder what it is," Kougami says in a slightly stiff voice, as if she's pushing herself. She carefully unwraps the rectangular parcel.

"Wow…"

Inside the case is tightly packed with fountain pens, and three bottles of vibrantly colored ink.

"You mentioned them before."

"They're beautiful… Hydrangea, azalea, and cosmos- they're all named after flowers, huh?"

"I didn't know what colours you had, so…"

"Is it really okay for me to have these? I've always wanted them, but… Thank you, Imai-kun." Kougami says excitedly. She seems really happy with his gift. Imai looks glad and relieved.

"Good for you, Imai," I say. I pat his back before giving Kougami my present. She unwraps the present, then looks at me with surprise.

"This… Wasn't it super hard to find? It only aired in a single theater ten years ago."

“Yeah. I couldn’t find a new copy, so it’s used… It’s still in good condition, though.”

My gift was a DVD of a sort of old movie. She said she loved this movie before.

“Thank you… It’s a French movie about the relationship between someone who makes specimens and their assistant.”

“Specimens?”

“Yeah, that’s right. His aren’t skeletons, though.” Kougami laughs as she lovingly runs her finger along the case. Her pale, slender fingers are strangely captivating in a way that reminds me of bones for a moment.

“Well then, should we cut into the cake?” Kougami asks. I politely decline.

“What’s wrong?”

“No, you should take your time and eat it with your family later. You’re still recovering, so I’d feel bad about intruding any longer. Oh yeah, I have plans this evening, too.”

“Plans…?”

“We made another cake for tasting. We wouldn’t have given it to you if it was too nasty.”

Kougami isn’t her usual self, so there’s no way we could give her a horrible cake.

“I see. But are your plans… with Sakurako-san?”

“Yeah, I promised to meet her for a bite to eat.”

Gran isn’t there, but Ariwara-san and Sawa-san are. Kouji-san’s cousin, who co-owns an IT company, mentioned a good auberge in Higashikawa. I never pass up an opportunity to eat something good, so I’m going with them.

“…I see.”

“Oh, but even if I didn’t have any plans, I’d still be going home early today…” Kougami looks lonely. I didn’t want to stay long so she could rest, but I shouldn’t have told her my plans.

“B-but if you’re feeling alright, I can always cancel my plans. I want you to rest up if you need to.”

“…I’m lonely without you, so I wanna stay as long as I can, but it wouldn’t be good for you.” Azechi hugs Kougami’s arm. I’m glad

she's backing me up, since I didn't mean to offend Kougami. Imai nods, too.

Kougami still looks sickly. She knows better than any of us that she's still unwell. Kougami hugs Azechi back and nods. The two of them reluctantly let go of each other. Imai stretches, clearly trying to hide how jealous he is of Azechi.

"Alright, we'll leave you be."

I grab Kougami's hand to help her to the door before we leave. She's wearing a white dress, just like the one Sakurako-san has. She's so slender that she almost looks like a walking skeleton. I don't even realize that I'm staring at her until she looks away in embarrassment and holds her arm over her chest.

"…You were thinking that this stomach bug would make for a good diet, weren't you?"

"Sorry… I was just thinking that I want you to get better soon. Azechi and Imai keep arguing every day, I don't know how to handle it anymore."

"Aww, hearing that would make me want to stay home even if I was healthy." Kougami lets out an exaggerated sigh. We both laugh until Azechi kicks my shin as hard as she can.

"I'm really sorry… See you at school. Get well soon.

"Yeah, I know. See you later," Kougami says with a reserved, lonely smile.

Is it really okay for me to leave her?

After the three of us leave Kougami's house, Azechi lets out a long sigh. "Yuriko has lost a lot of weight. Is she really okay?"

"Well… She does have gastroenteritis," Imai says with a forced smile. Imai had acute viral gastroenteritis last year, and he was stuck in bed for a week.

"Yeah… I guess so…" Azechi says, but she still doesn't look convinced.

"What's wrong?"

"…How should I put it… Yuriko hasn't been herself lately, even before she got sick…" Azechi mumbles.

"…" Imai and I don't know how to respond, because we feel the same way.

"I wonder… If she's decided what to do with her future."

"Didn't she say she wanted to go to university, but hadn't picked which one yet?"

"Well… During career consultations, I heard the teacher say, 'why don't you put some more thought into what you want to do?' to her. I know she doesn't want to move out because she has to help with her grandpa, so she was talking about the social services department at Asahi U, but… She must be worried about it."

Kougami has mentioned several times that she'd like to study some type of nursing care to help her family, but I've never heard her say that she's actually interested in it personally. She must be worried after hearing what Isozaki-sensei said.

"The future, huh…"

I think it's normal for one's family situation to influence what job they decide to do. In my case, my options would be limited.

"But she's going to need to decide soon."

Once the school trip is over, it'll be time for exams. The time limit is coming up fast. All three of us sigh in unison.

Once Kougami is feeling better, I'll invite her to our usual cafe. Maybe that'll help, at least a little bit. It's quiet, and smells like tea. If time was visible, it would look like the steam around the edges of a tea cup. Even if you can see it, you can't touch it. How many more chances will I get to mess around with Azechi and Imai, or go get tea with Kougami? When I think about the passage of time, I feel anxious and impatient. It's fall during my second year of high school. I walk home, surrounded by the blood red Rowan trees.

First Bone: Cernunnos Elixir

Part 1

In the middle of September there's three holidays in a row. That's when the Gourmet Fest is held in Asahikawa to celebrate

autumn, the season of appetite. In the 1.7 kilometers between Asahikawa Station and Tokiwa Park, restaurants from both inside and out of Hokkaido line up their stalls and serve delicious food.The event attracts 1.2 million people over the three days. As a local, I look forward to it every year. While biting into a skewer of roasted beef, pork, or even deer or lamb, you can try all the fresh seafood and dairy products, only to finish it off with a variety of different kinds of ramen, then get some sweets to take home.

My brother was supposed to come home and go with us this year. Something came up though, unfortunately. I had a lot going on during that time, so I wouldn't have had much time to spend with him anyway. He didn't come home for New Year's, either, so I was sad I didn't get to see him. It's been nearly a year since I saw him, after all. My mom says "Your big brother is busy, he's in university, after all."

Near the end of September, I suddenly get a phone call from him.

"I'm going home for the holidays."

"Really?"

"Yeah, during health and sports day."

This is pretty sudden.

"Okay… Well if you're going to bring me a souvenir, make it some doughnuts. Original glazed, please."

"Can't you get those in Hokkaido? The baked doughnuts you get in Wassamu are way better, aren't they?"

"That's a completely different matter. I want them to be cold so they get all fluffy after I warm them up in the microwave." The doughnuts from Wassamu are delicious, especially their pumpkin doughnuts. The pumpkin adds a touch of sweetness, and the pumpkin seeds on top are nice and crunchy.

I sit down on the couch so I can focus on the phone call. I can't bring myself to tell him that I miss him, so I ask about doughnuts instead.

"Anyway, I'm taking you on a trip while I'm visiting, so don't make any plans."

“What? A trip?! Just the two of us? And I don’t get any say in it?” I get flustered for a minute at the sudden command. He didn’t even ask if I was free. Well, he’s like this sometimes.

“Just the two of us. I’ve already made up my mind.”

“It’s nice of you to take me somewhere, but why just the two of us? What about mom, or our grandpas?”

“Mom already has other plans, and I don’t have enough money to bring a bunch of people anyway.”

“Oh, okay.”

So it’s a matter of money… I’ll pitch in what I can, and I’m sure my mom will give him some money, but trips are pretty expensive.

“If they can pay their own travel expenses, you can bring some friends along.”

“I’ll ask, but it’s pretty sudden… Where are we going, anyway?”

“I don’t know. I want you to decide by the day after tomorrow. It has to be in Hokkaido, for about 2 nights. See you later!” He hangs up the call.

We’ve never gone on a trip alone together, so I wonder what brought this on. He hasn’t been home to Hokkaido in over a year, so maybe this is his way of dealing with homesickness? And he said I can pick anywhere in the prefecture… Even though I’m still trying to wrap my head around the sudden plans, I head to the Kujou house the day after the phone call. It’s important for me to maintain my routine.

Part 2

On the day that she told me about gran’s hospitalization, Sakurako-san and I made a promise. In our usual seat at our usual tea shop, having roasted tea with caramel ice cream in it, we had a discussion.

“So, what are the rules you decided on?” She asked in a hushed voice so nobody else would hear. I could feel her breath tickle my face.

“Regardless of what kind of life it is, don’t kill it, and don’t idly let it die. I don’t want you to neglect anything you can do to protect a

life. You mustn't measure life by just numbers. It must sound ridiculous to you, but you're smart, so I'm sure you can handle it."

I made the proposal while knowing it's an unreasonable demand. Still, it was something I had to say.

"You're many times smarter than me. That's why I want you to use that brain to try to protect the lives of others. Regardless of if it's a life full of evil, or a life that's coming to an end. I think that at the very least, we should let the law decide who's good or evil."

"You're incredibly unreasonable. What about when the law forgives something evil?"

She must be talking about the ones who slipped through the system in the incident with Kobamatsu-san. Rather than displeasure, she's looking at me with interest.

"Well… That's because even if bad people are sometimes overlooked by the country, it's irrelevant to you, right?"

Yeah, it has nothing to do with Sakurako-san. She's neither moral nor malicious.

"You absolutely cannot create another bereaved family."

"…"

No matter how horrible a perpetrator may be, they still have people who love and protect them. Killing someone to make them pay for their sins is only hurting that person's family. Love transcends good and evil. That family's love will take the form of hatred. Anger at the people watching, and their thoughtless words. When there's no one else to direct that uncontrollable rage at, I fear that the blade will be turned toward Sakurako-san.

"After all, if you were harmless— If we were powerless, Hanabusa would have given up on us." With those words, Sakurako-san slowly blinked. "You're special, so as long as Hanabusa knows that there's a chance you'll go down the same path as him, he'll keep going after you. He wants to make you a criminal."

He loves his butterflies - the people he's poisoned with his nectar. He uses them as puppets, commanding them to do evil deeds under the name of "justice." He calls Sakurako-san a white butterfly, but she isn't under his control.

"I'll never let you be one of Hanabusa's butterflies."

I used to think of bones as a symbol of death, but Sakurako-san taught me that they're proof of one's life. She loves every living thing, even if it's changed its form, but she's still capable of ending a life if she thinks she needs to.

"As long as you don't give up on saving a life, you'll never be like Hanabusa, no matter what happens. I don't care how fascinated you are with the bones after a life has ended."

Phantom is watching us from somewhere safe. If he's as smart as he seems, he should leave us alone when he realizes that we'll never submit to him. That's why she needs these rules. I have to show him that Sakurako-san is harmless.

"I… We don't want to lose you. I believe that people make decisions to protect the people they love, rather than what's right or wrong. Shouko-san and Ariwara-san would be devastated if something happened to you." Kougami, Utsumi-san, and even Isozaki-sensei would be sad, too. "No matter what happens, and no matter how hard it is, I never want you to turn out like Hanabusa. Thinking 'it's okay for someone to die as long as it results in less deaths overall' is the same as thinking 'it's okay to let someone die.' Do you understand me?"

"Even if I only end up saving one person in the end?" Sakurako-san whispers.

"I'm not talking about the end result," I say immediately. She stares at me for a moment. "When Nazuna-san was going to jump, you said 'if you want to die, then just do it,' didn't you? You decided that he would commit more crimes if he were left alive, you figured it would be better to end it there. You decided that the world didn't need him anymore."

Sakurako-san bites her lips together. This reminds me of the case with the Toudou family's grandpa. One of the women sitting next to us is giving me a suspicious glance. I must have gotten too heated.

"You didn't… You didn't say a single word to try and stop Nazuna-san from jumping. It's the same with Toudou-san. You knew he was in danger from the medicine he was taking, but you didn't

say anything to him. If you'd spoken up, he might not have died that night. That's what professor Shiatara would have done, right?"

The corners of Sakurako-san's mouth curl up. It's more of a bitter expression than a smile. She sighs, and turns her gaze to the scenery outside the window.

"I will never be my uncle, no matter how much I try. I've known that fact very well since I was young."

"But you can learn, can't you? You have a wonderful laugh. So… Please, keep learning. A human life is no different from bones. Even if you think it's unnecessary, you don't know who or what it's supporting. You can't just thoughtlessly discard it. Just like the coccyx."

The coccyx - Sakurako-san told me about them before while talking about the human skeleton.

"Humans don't have tails anymore, so is the bone unnecessary?" I ask.

She laughs at me. "That's nonsense. The muscles attached to the coccyx support the internal organs from below. If that doesn't make it an important bone, then what does?"

She was turned away from me before, but as soon as bones are brought up, she faces me again. She's only in a good mood when bones are involved. Or sweet treats.

"Well… The human body does have unnecessary bones. The ribs, for example. Humans normally have 12 ribs, but about 10% of adults have a 13th rib."

"Quit nitpicking. You know what I meant, right?"

As she resumes eating her ice cream, Sakurako-san calmly nods. "I understand. Well, I get what you were trying to say."

"You really understand…?"

I sip my tea that's started to turn cold. The aroma comforts me a bit. At the very least, I'm relieved she didn't reject my idea.

"Snow Apollo butterflies are beautiful, but those fragile, transparent wings don't suit you. Don't you think you'd be a sturdier butterfly?"

"That's true. It's unfortunate that I can't see my own bones that support me. I'll never get to hold them. Even though I have such

splendid femurs…” Sakurako-san looks genuinely disappointed as she pats her thigh.

“…Are you serious?”

Ah, that’s right. She‘s always serious.

“If you became a criminal and the police caught you, you wouldn’t be able to make skeletal specimens anymore. Wouldn’t that be hard on you?”

“That’s very true.”

If she could, this eccentric would tear off her own flesh just to get a glimpse of her own bones. She nods meekly. Even after saying all that I have, I can’t get rid of the anxiety deep in my chest. I wonder if she really wanted to, if Sakurako-san could commit a crime and never get caught by the police.

Two weeks after that conversation, gran was safely released from the hospital in Sapporo. We’re celebrating her discharge today. Though with that said, it’s a bit troubling that the guest of honour is the one doing the cooking. Of course I’m happy to eat gran’s cooking again, I just don’t want her to overdo it. I’ve decided to help with preparations.

I haven’t had a lot of experience with it, but frying food is surprisingly fun. It’s a little scary, but still fun. I pick up one of the fresh, crispy onion rings to taste it while it’s still hot. The sweet, sticky onion pops out of the breading .

“Ish hot, but sho good”

“They’re best when they’re freshly fried, fufufu.” Gran smiles as she continues her tasks.

“When you’re adding liquid to your breading , it’s best to use cold, carbonated water. The lady of the house would have it with beer, but the young lady and I don’t usually drink alcohol.”

“Is that so… Maybe I’ll try it at my house some time. My mom doesn’t drink every day, but she does occasionally.”

Frying food is pretty repetitive work. Put it in the oil, turn it over, take it out at the right time, and repeat. I was nervous at first, but now that it’s my third round, I’m totally calm. I end up lost in thought.

“…”

“Is something wrong? Are you worried about something?” Gran grabs my hand and looks worried after she notices me staring silently at the oil.

“Ah… Oh, no. It’s just… something small…”

“Did something happen?”

“It’s more like… I’m thinking about something?” There’s no way I can tell gran about the situation between Sakurako-san and me. “Umm… Uh, it’s nothing important. It’s just that my brother is coming to visit soon, and he wants the two of us to go on a trip together.”

“Oh, a trip with your brother? That sounds nice. What’s troubling you about it?”

She takes the chopsticks from me. I move to the kitchen table to destring peas.

“Apparently my mom already had plans, so she can’t go. My brother told me I can pick anywhere I want to go, but that’s exactly the problem. It’s a long weekend, so if I don’t pick somewhere soon, we won’t be able to find a place to stay.”

“Ashiyoro and Abashiri.”

“…What?” I suddenly hear a voice from behind me. When I turn around, it’s none other than Sakurako-san standing there.

“The museum in Ashiyoro has a complete whale skeleton, and there’s a skeleton exhibit in Abashiri. How’s that? Perfect, isn’t it?” Sakurako-san hands me a brochure for the Abashiri folk museum with sparkles in her eyes.

“Perfect…? Well, maybe for you…”

The brochure is covered in pictures of bones with the words “huge bone exhibit!” written across the top. I can’t help but groan when I see it.

“It’s a good idea, isn’t it? I’d like to go, too, if I could. If there’s some extra time, I’d like to stop at the Higashidaisetsu nature museum in the Nukabira hot spring village. They don’t have a lot of skeletons on display, but I hear it’s a wonderful exhibit, so I’d like to see it at least once.”

Sakurako-san tilts her head to the side when she sees that I'm unimpressed. I mean, it sounds perfect for her, at least.

"It's me and my brother who are going, not you- Actually, he said I can bring a friend as long as they pay their own travel expenses."

"Really?!" Her eyes are shining.

I know I suggested it, but is it really okay to take her on a trip with my brother and I? Like, is it ethical?

"Well, I do have relatives in Tokachi, so we could pass through Ashiyoro and Abashiri on the way, but…"

"I don't mean to doubt you, young master, but letting the young lady travel with just men is…" Gran finishes frying the onion rings and turns to me with a stern expression.

"I'd invite you, too, gran… But you just got out of the hospital, so I'm worried it would be too hard on your body."

"I'm sure you wouldn't want an old lady like me bothering you on your trip." Gran laughs and shakes her head.

"That's not true at all! In fact, why don't we go visit a hot spring together once you're feeling a little better? Maybe the one in Nukabira?"

"I was actually born in Horoka, near Nukabira. The village doesn't exist anymore, though… It's so sweet of you to offer… I feel like I'm going to cry…"

"Oh, you're exaggerating. You always make such good food for me that I feel like I have to pay you back."

"Pay me back? Nothing makes me happier than seeing other people enjoy my cooking. Anyway, I'll have to pass on the trip this time. I'd feel better if Naoe-sama or Lady Chiyoda went with you, though…"

I think my brother would be concerned to have Ariwara-san join us on the trip. I think it would still be pretty fun, though.

"Maybe Shouko-san, then…"

Putting aside the travel expenses, I think it would be easier to invite Shouko-san. Besides gardening, she also enjoys traveling. It would be helpful to have someone else to keep an eye on Sakurako-san, too.

“No, I’m not going on a trip to see bones.”

I call to invite her, but she immediately turns me down.

“…I know, right?”

She has a good point. My brother wouldn’t like it, either.

“…But Abashiri, huh… I’d like to go whale watching before winter comes, and there’s a place where you can pet squirrels.”

Apparently she’s been to Abashiri a number of times already, since Kouji-san owns a hotel on the shore of Lake Abashiri. Whales and squirrels… I’d like to see them, too.

“I won’t accompany you on the skeleton tour, but I’d be happy to meet up with you in Abashiri and stay at the inn together. I’ll get Kouji-kun to prepare rooms for us- Oh, and I’ll sign us all up for sling yoga lessons.”

“What? Oh, uh, okay…”

What the hell is sling yoga? Shouko-san hung up before I could ask. The hotel she’s booking for us will probably be expensive… I’m a bit worried, but at least I’ve secured lodging in Abashiri. I’ll email Kouji-san and ask him to at least give us the cheapest room.

“How about we stay at my relative’s place in Kamishihoro on the first day? Are you okay with that?”

“Are you sure we won’t be bothering them?”

“It’s my paternal grandpa’s older brother’s house. My brother and I used to go on trips there a lot when we were little. I think he’ll be happy to have us.”

Maybe it’s because he doesn’t have a grandson of his own, but my hunting grandpa always treated my brother and I like we were his own. His New Year’s gifts are always good, too.

“Are you fine with it, Sakurako-san?” I ask. She breaks out into a huge smile.

“There’s no problem. I’ll make sure you and your brother learn plenty about bones.”

“Uhh…”

Wait, no, that's not really… Just as I try to say something, Hector barks happily. Sawa-san had been invited over to the Kujou house, and just arrived. Isozaki-sensei will arrive soon, too. I guess we're done talking about the trip for now.

I'm fine. Honestly, I think this situation is kind of funny. The problem is my brother. What am I even going to say to him… After celebrating gran's recovery, I anxiously phone my brother.

"Alright," he says unexpectedly, readily agreeing.

Honestly, something feels off about how anticlimactic it was. I don't even know why my brother is suddenly taking me on a trip in the first place. I have a bad feeling about it.

This is also the first time my brother and I are really going on a trip with just the two of us. When my brother becomes a working adult and I go into higher education or out into society, we won't have many chances like this. My brother will probably get a job in Tokyo. I'll be taking entrance exams next year. When I think about it that way, this might be the last time that the two of us can spontaneously travel together. Still, I have a strange feeling of unease.

Part 3

The days march on, and in the blink of an eye, the consecutive holidays are here. It's awkward seeing my brother after so long apart. He's perfectly fine with the itinerary that I sent him. I asked him if he had anywhere he wanted to go, but he just shrugged and said, "not in particular." I think it's weird that he suggested the trip in the first place, but doesn't have any opinions on where to go. Maybe he just wants to explore Hokkaido for a while, since he hasn't come back in a long while. Regardless of the reason, Sakurako-san, my brother, and I load up into my mom's car and start heading for Shimukappu through Minamifurano.

My grandpa told me before that the breeze in fall is sometimes called "golden wind." Apparently it's because fall was associated with gold in the ancient Chinese 5 elements, but the scenery passing by the car window really does look like gold. The weather is nice, but

the fall colours aren't as striking as normal, probably because of the typhoons this year blocking out the sun for them. The rice has been harvested for the year, so the remaining roots in the paddies cast shadows along the dirt.

We leave just past 6am. It's still early, so Sakurako-san looks sleepy in the back seat. The car is silent, especially compared to how noisy it is in Sakurako-san's car from her music. According to the weather report on the radio, the weather will be clear today.

I'm sitting in the passenger seat, eating onigiri that my Nagayama grandma made for us. I glance at my brother. He looks just like our dad, based on the pictures I've seen. I look more like my mom. My nose turns down like hers does, so I've always been jealous of my brother's straight nose. He was popular in high school, so I always saw him with girls. He tends to be more interested in his own hobbies than girls, though. He has always been good with his hands, and likes building plastic models and mini 4WDs. He even took apart the living room clock and fixed it when it stopped working one time. It's just my opinion, but I think he's similar to Sakurako-san with how they both centre their lives around their hobbies. I wondered if they would end up getting along, or if they wouldn't because of their similarities… And it seems like the worst case scenario came true. Neither of them are very sociable. When they first met, I introduced them to each other with, "This is my brother, Atsushi Tatewaki. This is Sakurako Kujou-san, an acquaintance of mine." Sakurako-san said, "I'm in your debt," and my brother nodded silently. They haven't spoken a word to each other since then.

"You're already eating?" My brother asks me.

"Yeah, I was too excited about the trip to eat or sleep much, and then I slept in too late this morning."

I bite into the oversized onigiri. My Nagayama grandma's onigiri are always big and tasty. The rice is soft and fluffy. She forms them gently so she doesn't crush any of the grains. She mixes lots of salmon into the rice so that you can taste it with every bite. After my mom and I picked up my brother at the airport, we went to my Nagayama grandpa's house to have a kushiage party. My mountain grandpa came, too. We had my grandpa's favourite pork skewers, of

course, but we also prepared some food especially for my brother's first time back in Hokkaido. The sashimi, shrimp, and clams were already great, but we had shishamo smelt, too, since the ban on fishing them was just lifted. We had incan potatoes, caciocavallo, and lily roots, too. They were coated in batter, fried, then served as soon as they were done. Normally I would worry about burning my mouth, but it was so good that I couldn't stop myself.

I've been really excited for this trip. I just hope my brother and Sakurako-san can enjoy it, too.

"Speaking of being too excited to sleep, that happened to you before your field trips in elementary and middle school, so you got sick and was the only one who couldn't go, right?"

"Only in elementary school! I went to Hakodate with everyone else in middle school."

"Oh yeah, that was the time it rained so you couldn't see the view at night."

"…You remember too much."

My brother smiles happily. He's seemed grumpy this whole time, so I'm relieved. It's been so long since we last met that it's felt awkward and a bit disorienting. Laughing about an old story always makes things feel normal again, somehow.

From Shimukappu, we go up the Doutou expressway. Unlike the road between Asahikawa and Sapporo, the single-lane Doutou expressway feels oppressive, and a bit scary. Especially with so many roads blocked off due to the typhoon, so the traffic is backed up. I don't know whether it's because he hasn't been in Hokkaido for a while, or because Sakurako-san and I are in the car, but my brother is driving a lot more slowly and carefully than usual. Well, not that he has much choice with all the traffic.

Since the expressway has almost no rest stops, we decide to take a break in Shimizu, Tokachi. Tomamu's four towers look incredible at night, but they're pretty ordinary during the day.

My brother and Sakurako-san are both completely silent unless I say something to them. Well, my brother isn't very talkative in the first place. Plus he's trying to focus on driving through the mountain

pass, and there are lots of accidents from deer jumping out around here. My brother has always been extra cautious when he's with me.

I've always felt like I have a strong blood relationship with my mom. I can see parts of her when I look in the mirror, we like the same foods, and we act similar. I'm always being made aware of how we're parent and child. But my brother is different. We have different moms, so that's part of it… But even the way he smells is more like my mountain grandpa. In a lot of ways, he's more like our dad. I've always had my grandpas, but I've never had a dad in my life, so my brother ended up filling that role. We're only four years apart in age, but he feels much more reliable and mature than me.

I look back at Sakurako-san in the mirror. She looks bored, watching the world go by in the window. She looks cute when she's sleepy with her cheek pressed against the window. I can't help but smile.

After my grandma died and my brother moved away, I felt like I was all alone in the world. What would have happened to me if I hadn't met Sakurako-san back then? I was just an empty shell at that point. I don't know if I'm happiest the way I am now, but at least I have the two most important people with me right now. I just wish they got along better…

Eventually, Obihiro city comes into view. It's just past 10am, and as the forecast said, it's a clear day. As soon as I see all the solar panels and carports, I can instantly tell that this area doesn't get much snow. We're still in Hokkaido, but just traveling 3-4 hours took us to a completely different climate. We decide to have lunch a little early, but the restaurant we wanted to go to isn't open yet. We decide to stop by the Banei racetrack for a while instead.

Nowadays, there are lots of stores and houses lined up near the racetrack, so it's a popular tourist spot now. Unfortunately, the races are later in the day. I'm not old enough to bet on them, anyway. Still, it was fun getting to see a giant draft horse. Sakurako-san looked delighted when she was looking at the warhorse. She keeps on talking about how wonderful the horses are while we're at

the petting corner. I can't help but wonder if her eyes are looking straight past the skin, peering at the large bones within the animals.

"Look how big its hooves are. The diameter is about the length of a pen. Since they have to support such a muscular build, their bones are large, too. It's amazing to see them up close."

The warhorses are so much bigger than thoroughbreds, they almost remind me of dinosaurs. It makes sense that there would be gigantic bones inside a body of this size. But even such a giant horse is cute when it's demanding a carrot with its front leg.

My brother's favourite is a small pony. He bought a cup of carrots to feed them. As I'm asking him to give me one to feed the horses, I notice Sakurako-san staring at us.

"…What?" My brother asks, uncomfortable.

"It's nothing, I was just thinking about how similar your skeletons are."

"Well, we have the same father."

"The shapes of your earlobes are exactly the same. Your father must have had plump earlobes. Large earlobes are a dominant gene."

I unconsciously look at my brother. It's true, he has the same fleshy earlobes as me.

"Come to think of it, mom's earlobes aren't that big… I see, so it's hereditary."

My brother must be thinking "what the hell?" right now. I try to say something, but Sakurako-san has already lost interest and started wandering off.

"Umm… Well, she's a bit eccentric," I try to explain.

My brother looks like he has something he wants to say but won't say it. This is a problem. Will this trip really turn out to be fun? Despite the bright blue sky, clouds are beginning to gather in my heart.

Part 4

For our early lunch, we're eating at a popular Italian restaurant. Obihiro is known for its pork bowls, but it's a big place, so everything

from dairy to wheat is delicious here (not that I think it's better than Asahikawa!). My brother orders pizza, while Sakurako-san and I both order pasta. It was just the right amount of food for my brother, a bit too much for Sakurako-san, and unfortunately not enough to fill me up.

On the way back to Obihiro we stop by an old bakery to pick up some sandwiches and mini rolls that I always like. The sandwiches have mayonnaise spaghetti between slices of white bread. It's a dangerous combination of carbs on carbs, but somehow the chewy texture, sourness of the mayonnaise, and soft bread form an addictive dish. And the dinner rolls, sometimes called sheet pan buns, are so fluffy and moist that biting into them makes me have an epiphany of "Ah! Bread is truly a wonderful food," every single time. It's crazy. There's nothing better than food made with fresh milk.

When they have a full stomach, people tend to be kind. No matter what happens today, I'm prepared to take it on with care and affection. At the restaurant earlier Sakurako-san wanted a parfait, but with my brother being who he is, said "you didn't finish your pasta, so no dessert." Sakurako-san seemed pretty downcast about it, so my brother feels guilty. I agree with him, but I don't want Sakurako-san to be in a bad mood, so I buy ice cream for the both of us. She was overjoyed while eating it, but when she inevitably left the cone behind, my brother scolded her again for being picky. He's the strictest person in my family about food. Not so much about manners, but more about being picky or not finishing your plate. It's thanks to his strictness that I conquered the loathsome tomato as a child.

Still, I feel like the atmosphere in the car has improved considerably since we ate. Well, we can't keep a conversation going and there's still some tension, but it's a big improvement over this morning. Unfortunately, this is where my brother's good mood meets its end.

After about an hour of driving we arrive in Ashoro, and head straight for the museum of animal fossils. Upon arriving at the

entrance of the modern building, we're welcomed by a stone statue of a smooth hippo monster.

"It's an Ashoroa," Sakurako-san informs me.

It's a new species of Desmostylia that was discovered here in Ashoro. It's a holiday, so I can hear that there's lots of kids around as we head inside. Most of the exhibits are related to the Ashoroa. Further inside, there's an entire whale skeleton.

"Woah…" My brother can't hide his surprise.

I've seen pictures before, but I've never seen a real whale skeleton for myself.

"It's magnificent… It's so beautiful."

Sakurako-san is trembling with excitement. She spreads her arms wide, like she would hug it if she could.

There are sperm whales and baird's beaked whales suspended from the ceiling, so they look like they're swimming through the air.

"…Is something wrong with its head?" My brother suddenly asks Sakurako-san.

The whale's whole head is flat and box-shaped, like it's full of something.

"No, it's supposed to look like that. That part of the head is thought to protect the skull. It's actually full of oil. The organ inside takes up about a third of the whale's head. The oil inside is cloudy and white, like semen, which is why they're called sperm whales."

"Semen…?" My brother is taken aback by Sakurako-san's enthusiastic explanation.

I really want to warn her about her phrasing in public places.

"Can you guess what the oil is for?"

"Hmm… Is it for nutrition, like a camel's hump?" My brother suggests.

"No, it's actually to control buoyancy. They can allow sea water into their nostrils and let it flow next to the oil to control the temperature. Inhaling water cools the oil, making it denser so the whale can sink. Exhaling the water warms the oil, allowing the whale to float to the surface. Amazing, isn't it?"

Sakurako-san is excited to share her knowledge, but my brother has completely lost interest in the whales.

“I’d rather see a live whale, then. Anyway… Apparently you can dig for fossils over there.” My brother says.

He heads to the hands-on-experience corner for kids where you can dig fake fossils out of gypsum. This is a problem… Now I have to choose between going with my brother or Sakurako-san, and I need to decide fast.

“Then… I’ll look around here with you,” I say to Sakurako-san.

I’m sorry, nii-san, but my intellectual curiosity is getting the best of me.

“I’d love to see how they go about assembling a skeleton this big.”

“I would, too. Whale skeletons are pretty hard to come by, but if we ask Sawa-san, he might let us see how they build the skeletons of big animals at the zoo.”

Apparently whales and dolphins are actually the same thing, they’re just given a different name based on their size. I heard a myth about how dolphins and humans used to be the same creature, but evolved differently to live either on land or in the sea. I wonder how the Ashoroa ended up looking like that? After discovering the Ashoroa skeleton, three scholars each came up with their own predictions of what it might have looked like while it was alive.

After exploring, I head back to my brother. Sakurako-san made friends with one of the curators, so my brother and I spent an hour digging rocks out of plaster, and making our own plaster models of ammonites while she was busy talking. It was fun, but it was embarrassing to be the only adults among all the kids.

By the time we get back to the car, my brother is on his last nerve. He stays quiet for the whole drive to our hunting grandpa’s house. I told him about a really good waffle shop nearby, but he completely ignored me. I’d speak up about it, but it would only put him in a worse mood. What’s he so mad about, anyway? What if he decides to just cut the trip short and go home? He doesn’t look like he’s enjoyed the trip at all so far.

Part 5

While I was busy worrying, we managed to arrive at my relative's house. My hunting grandpa is two years older than my mountain grandpa. He lives with my aunt (his daughter) and her husband, as well as their daughters (Aki-neechan and Youko-neechan) and their spouses.

"It's good to see you two!"

Aki-neechan, the oldest daughter, welcomes us at the door with a big hug. She has a small build, and she's a bit of an airhead, but she's kind and good at cooking. Whenever I visit, she always makes delicious food for me.

"Oh no! Look, nee-san! Atsushi is old now! Woah, and Shoutarou is getting so tall, too! They're leaving you behind!"

The second daughter, Youko-neesan says while patting my head. She has short hair, and always dresses in boyish clothes. I've always been jealous of how slender and tall she is, but I've finally surpassed her.

"I can't believe it! Shou-chan is old enough to grow a beard by now!"

"I can't believe he's the same Shoutarou that would play in the inflatable pool completely naked."

I can hear not just my brother, but Sakurako-san as well, laughing behind me. I'm mortified.

"You mean that time in kindergarten?! The elastic band just snapped while I was playing!"

Even though it was one time, they bring it up every time we meet. They'll probably keep doing this for the rest of my life. They're both about the same age as Sakurako-san, or maybe a bit younger, but they're so childish… I refrain from saying anything back, though.

"You still like venison, right? Because I made something suuuuper tasty!"

"Yeah, that'll never change."

Aki-neechan's husband is a hunter. They send us some venison every year, and it's always delicious enough that I can ignore their teasing.

Seeing our relatives again after such a long time has brought a smile back to my brother's face. Sakurako-san seems unaccustomed

to this kind of warm welcome. She looks bewildered by how noisy and boisterous it is. I introduce Sakurako-san as “an acquaintance who is an aspiring scholar.” As part of her research, she had to go from Ashoro to Abashiri, so we decided to make a trip out of it. Well, even if it’s not exactly right, it’s close enough. Sakurako-san is wearing a nice, white dress today, so as long as she stays silent, she seems like a well mannered young lady. My aunts seem a bit confused by who she is, but she’s probably going to show her true colours soon, anyway.

Sakurako-san immediately takes interest in the decorative head of a deer and skull of a bear. “I’ll show them to you after dinner,” my hunting grandpa says cheerfully. After all the commotion, we head in for an early dinner.

With the door to the altar room open, we head to the living room where there’s two tables with large platters of food lined up on them. With everyone gathering around, it reminds me of summer vacation when I was little. My mom is here, too, after all.

The food prepared for us is chawanmushi (my brother’s favourite), sweet and spicy fried tofu (my favourite), grilled chum salmon, and venison tataki. When he heard we were coming, my Kushiro grandpa (mountain grandpa and hunting grandpa’s younger brother) came all the way to deliver some big whelks, and fatty pacific saury.

There’s 11 people here, it’s basically a party. My brother is in a good mood, since Youko-neechan’s husband brought out his special Ikeda wine. I’m surprised, since it’s my first time seeing my brother drink alcohol. I’m happy enough to just eat dried fruit and cheese while everyone else talks, but I feel uneasy seeing Sakurako-san getting left out of the conversation.

“Is the food okay, Kujou-san? Do you not like venison?“

“The deer my brother in law hunts aren’t gamey, so even people who don’t like deer can enjoy it.”

“Oh, actually… Sakurako-san doesn’t really like meat.”

Aki-neechan and Youko-neechan’s husbands start asking Sakurako-san questions after seeing that she hasn’t eaten much.

Sakurako-san doesn't eat much in the first place. Gran is always trying to find new ways to get more food into her.

"Kazunori-kun is a good shot, so the deer he kills always taste good. He always gets a headshot," my hunting grandpa says, sipping on shochu.

"A quick kill is better because it doesn't leave the deer in pain, and they taste better when they're not in distress. They have to be hunted so they don't overpopulate, so we might as well eat them, too."

Kazunori-san (Aki-neechan's husband) looks embarrassed by all the praise. He looks like a gentle person, so I didn't expect him to be a good hunter. It's true, though. This venison is some of the best I've had. The deer my hunting grandpa brings back are good, too, of course. With a headshot and the blood drained right away, it tastes like any other red meat.

Recently, venison has become more widely available. Even if the meat is good, the blood isn't always drained properly, so the meat ends up tough and reeks of blood, like liver. Not to say I don't like liver, because I do. It always amazes me how big of a difference processing makes. But Sakurako-san still can't bring herself to eat the venison. She's the type of person who gets caught up in thinking about how it used to be a living creature. Well, if she doesn't like it, she doesn't have to eat it. I pass her some salad, and other things she can eat. She isn't a fan of the fish in chanchan yaki, but she's happy that the cabbage is sweet. Youko-neechan's husband is also worried about her. He brought over some sweet yet tart apples, and left the house for about 5 minutes then came back with prunes. The prunes aren't as sour as usual, so Sakurako-san is delighted. Everyone looks relieved. She said not to worry about it, but the urge to give their guests a warm welcome won. I feel a little bad about it.

"So when you study bones… Can you really find anything out from them?" Youko-neechan asks as she watches Sakurako-san dig into her third prune.

"I'm sure she can, since she knows way more about them than us," Hidemasa-san, Youko-neechan's husband, adds.

In contrast to how unrestrained Youko-neechan is, he's a caring person, and has been paying attention to what Sakurako-san needs. Unlike how Youko-neechan is quite tall, he's more on the wide end.

"There's some things you can learn, and some things you can't. The skull in particular is quite eloquent."

"Then… depending on the person, even a deer's head might be worth something?" Kazunori-san suddenly asks meekly.

"A deer's head?"

"Yeah, that's right. One time I hunted a deer, and only the head was stolen."

"That was strange, wasn't it?" Aki-neechan tilts her head to the side.

"It was early summer, and there was a request to exterminate some deer. Normally I take them to my garage to butcher after I drain the blood and remove the organs. I hurt my back while carrying a deer back to my car, though. I made it back home, but I felt terrible so I asked some fellow hunters to help butcher them."

"He says fellow hunters, but he always calls me first," Youko-neechan interjects.

Kazunori-san and Youko-neechan worked together, so they're pretty close.

"I'm in charge of cooking, too. Everyone wants to eat meat, but nobody wants to help cook it," Youko-neechan says, starting to raise her voice. Aki-neechan has to try to calm her down.

"Youko-chan used to help grandpa when she was little, so she's good at it. Besides, she's the only one who lives in that area."

It's true that Youko-neechan has always been fearless. She's the more active and spirited of the sisters, so she's always been teased for being my hunting grandpa's only grandson.

"So I made my phone calls, took a breather, and went back to the garage… But the deer was on the floor beneath where it was hanging, and the head was gone."

After removing the blood and organs, you hang the corpse and remove the skin. While the buck should have been hanging to be skinned, it was instead on the floor without a head. The blood had been drained out properly, so it didn't look like a murder scene, but

just a headless deer on its own sounds like something from a horror movie. Sakurako-san and I are sitting next to each other, across from the two married couples. My brother is sitting nearby, drinking wine. Both of us listen to the story quietly.

"I can understand taking the meat, but the head…?"

"Maybe it was someone who really likes bones, like Sakurako-san?"

"I'd take the whole skeleton in that case," Sakurako-san says, shaking her head.

I figured as much.

"…Then why just the head?"

"Luckily nothing weird has happened to me since then."

Aki-neechan says that she was scared for a while that something bad was going to happen. It's not a super scary story or anything, but the fact that someone broke into the garage just to decapitate an animal, even if it was already dead, is weird enough for me.

"Well, nothing came of it. I'm sure it was just a prank. We shouldn't be telling our guests scary stories, anyway," Hidemasa-san forces a smile.

My brother is pale after hearing that story.

"You said it happened in early summer… Was it a buck?"

Unfortunately, Sakurako-san is too interested to let it go.

"Huh? Um… Yeah, that's right. People often say they don't taste as good in early summer, but with a clean hit and proper processing, they're still good."

"Who else did you tell that you were going hunting? Anyone who lives nearby who could break in after you got home?" Sakurako-san asks.

Sakurako-san sucks the juice out of her prune, covering her hands in juice in the process. I hand her a tissue.

"Well, I'm sure at least a few people saw me carrying it back, but as for people I mentioned the hunt to… Only Youko-chan comes to mind."

Kazunori-san looks suspiciously at Aki-neechan and Youko-neechan.

“…What? You think it was me?!” Youko-neechan looks completely shocked.

“There’s no way she’d steal something she can’t eat,” Aki-neechan says.

She’s trying to protect her sister from blame.

“Even if she did steal it, we always have plenty, you ever want some you can just ask.”

“Yeah, exactly,” Youko-neechan says.

At least deny it, nee-chan.

“That’s right. It seems all the culprit needed was the head,” Sakurako-san says while wiping her hands, clearly tired of listening to the sisters.

“That’s true. If they put in all the effort to cut it off, the head must have been important for something. If it was meat they wanted, they could have just bought it,” My hunting grandpa, who has been quiet until now, mutters.

“A head…” Both sisters and Kazunori-san nervously repeat.

“…Maybe it’s like something from a horror movie, like eating the brain? What can you even do with a deer head?” Youko-neechan says, trembling.

“It wouldn’t be that strange. In some countries, deer brains are eaten. But there’s a risk of contracting diseases such as Creutzfeldt-Jakob, so people in Japan don’t usually eat it these days.”

“I think the French eat it,” Aki-neechan adds onto Sakurako-san’s explanation with a nod. She went to France on her honeymoon.

“But it probably wasn’t the brain they were after, but another part of the buck’s head that’s symbolic.”

“A male deer… So the antlers?”

“No, during that time of year the antlers are still… Ah!” Kazunori-san thinks of something mid-sentence, and suddenly shouts. “In spring and summer, the antlers are still small, but-“

“Antlers! That’s right!”

It seems Kazunori-san was the only one who understood Sakurako-san’s hint. She smiles widely. She turns to my brother and I this time.

“That’s right. New antlers. They’re also called rokujou.”

“Roku… jou?” My brother repeats the unfamiliar word that Sakurako-san said.

“In order words, antlers that have just started regrowing for the year. Also referred to as velvet antlers. They’re still soft, and covered in tissue,” my grandpa explains with a smile.

“You mean… They don’t start off hard?”

“That’s right. As you know, deer regrow their antlers every year. They’re still developing from early spring to early summer. During the growing period, the antlers are covered in soft skin and hair, with lots of blood vessels surrounding them. They harden later in the summer, so by fall they’ve become the antlers you’re familiar with.”

“But… What does that have to do with someone stealing the deer head?” I ask. My grandpa frowns.

“It’s… For traditional Chinese medicine.”

“What?”

“Rokujou are famous in traditional Chinese medicine. They’re dried and ground into powder, or pickled in alcohol. I’ve heard that people are willing to pay a pretty penny for them. Sometimes people ask me for them, but I just tell them that I only share my kills with my family…” Kazunori-san explains.

I wonder what effect the antlers are supposed to have?

“Then… Someone stole the head so they could sell it? These rokujou must be amazing, then.”

“Mm… Well, maybe.”

I don’t know how much Chinese medicine costs, but it must be worth a lot of money to risk stealing it. Or maybe the effect is so important that they couldn’t help it?

“What are rokujou supposed to do for you?”

When I ask, everyone in the room looks uncomfortable. We all sit in awkward silence for a while, since none of the adults seem to want to answer me.

I look at Sakurako-san. She shrugs and says, “it’s referred to as a drug for eternal youth and longevity, but the most famous effect is on the reproductive organs. Basically, it enhances the functions of the male—“

“It’s basically natural viagra!”

Sakurako-san starts to explain it to me, but Kazunori-san quickly interrupts her.

“Oh… I see.”

My brother nods. His face is red, though I’m not sure if it’s from the wine or the discussion. Hearing such “impolite” words coming from Sakurako-san, who looks like an upper class lady at a glance, while talking to me, a minor, must be the reason the mood got so weird. My aunts and uncles from the other table came over to see why the atmosphere changed.

“Well, let’s get back to finding the culprit,” Sakurako-san says. She’s completely unable to read her surroundings, so she just breaks through it and keeps going.

Everyone snaps back to reality.

“Decapitating a dead deer… A male, yezo sika. That’s no easy task. Even you, a seasoned hunter, often ask your sister in law to help with taking deer apart. Someone completely inexperienced probably couldn’t pull it off. Therefore, the culprit either has experience dismantling deer corpses, or has the opportunity to watch someone else do it. They would at least need the knowledge of where to insert the blade to correctly detach the vertebrae, right?” Sakurako-san says, the corners of her mouth curling into a smile.

Kazunori-san and the others quickly turn expressionless.

“Additionally, they had to have known that you hunted a deer, and that it was in your garage. If it was someone passing by who saw it, why not just ask for it? If it were a fellow hunter, they would probably just get their own deer, rather than take the risk of stealing one. To summarize, it’s someone who lives close to you, doesn’t go hunting but has experience butchering deer, and can’t tell you that they want an aphrodisiac. Well, considering they don’t want anyone to know about the aphrodisiac, the culprit is likely a man.”

“…”

Aki-neechan and the others are expressionless. Only one person is suspiciously avoiding eye contact.

“I-I wonder who…”

“…Hide-kun, you were the one standing next to me when I got the call from Kazunori-kun, right?” Youko-neechan says, staring daggers at her husband.

“After finishing the call, I went out to buy groceries for dinner alone… What did you do while I was out?”

“Umm… What was it? It was a long time ago, so I don’t remember hahaha…”

“And you’ve been staying late at work the past few months… You wouldn’t!”

Youko-neechan reaches across the table and grabs Hidemasa-san’s neck.

“T-this is a misunderstanding!”

“How is this a misunderstanding?! What did you need an aphrodisiac for?!”

She slams on the table in anger. Everyone scrambles to pick up their dishes and cups so they don’t fall over.

“I told you that I wouldn’t forgive you if you cheated on me again!”

Sakurako-san looks bored and sighs at the sudden marital spat.

“I wasn’t cheating! We weren’t even married yet back then! We’d just broken up for a while…”

These two started dating in high school, and have broken up then gotten back together countless times. Hidemasa-san looks like a giant teddy bear, so I never thought he was the type to sleep around…

“Then why did you need an aphrodisiac?! If you weren’t guilty, you wouldn’t have had to sneak around and steal it!”

“I didn’t use it! And I thought you’d be angry if I told you!”

Youko-neechan looks like a demon as she squeezes Hidemasa-san’s neck even harder. My aunts hear the commotion and try to stop her, but she just tightens her grip even more. Hidemasa-san’s face is bright red, and he’s waving his arms around. Sakurako-san stands up with a sigh and holds her hand out toward Youko-neechan.

“…The vertebrae are extremely important to the human body. You’re using too much force. Why not listen to what he has to say?”

“…”

Youko-neechan furrows her brow, then huffily releases Hidemasa-san, causing him to fall to his knees.

“There’s no doubt that he’s the one who stole the antlers. But there must be a reason he had to keep it a secret from all of you… considering he denied infidelity. In that case, let’s see if we can find a reason why he hid it from you.”

“…Maybe he was trying to make some extra money?” Youko-neechan says with a sullen expression.

“That could be it, but deer have been regarded as divine creatures for thousands of years, from all over the world. There’s the ceryneian hind of Artemis, the sacred deer of Nara that Takenikazuchi-no-mikoto rode upon, and cernunnos of Celtic myth which is theorized to be a deer.”

“…So what are you trying to say?”

“Cernunnos is a god associated with hunting, the underworld, and fertility. Perhaps it was inspired by the high fertility seen in deer. Although humans are part of the problem by killing all the wolves, their fertility is a big factor of why deer are considered pests in Hokkaido. That could be why their rokujou are prized in traditional Chinese medicine. Or maybe it’s just because the antlers are shaped like a human male’s reproductive organs…”

“Sakurako-san…” I interrupt her so she doesn’t go off in the wrong direction.

“Typically in Chinese medicine it’s advised to consume the part of an animal that is ailing you, or something that is visually similar.”

“We get it, just get to the point.”

I’ve known her for a long time, and even I get flustered when she suddenly says things like that. I can’t imagine how surprised my family is.

“…Anyway, even though these antlers have no proven effect, the user would still expect it to do something to them. Not only the aphrodisiac effect mentioned earlier, but also to treat infertility in women,” Sakurako-san says with a huff.

"…Huh?"

"The supposed effect isn't only limited to men. His wife, like me, has a longer ring finger than her index finger. It's an indicator of masculinity. She's more like a caribou than a yezo deer. The ceryneian hind is supposed to be a doe with stag-like antlers," Sakurako-san says, putting her hands on top of her head like antlers.

"Then are you saying… He used it on me?" Youko-neechan asks, surprised. She looks down at Hidemasa-san.

"No… Originally, I was going to secretly put the antler velvet in shochu for you to drink, but then I thought we should discuss it first, instead…" Hidemasa-san says apologetically. As you'd expect, he couldn't bring himself to secretly drug his wife, in the end.

Apparently this all started when he heard about antler velvet at a work drinking party. One of his drunk co-workers said he had a dried, newly grown deer antler that had been pickled in shochu, and about its invigorating effects. The co-worker knew Hidemasa-san's brother in law hunted deer, and joked that he should try it out.

"How should I say this… We've been together for a long time now, Youko, so I figured it was about time, y'know? I knew our parents were looking forward to having grandkids, so…"

Knowing that the antlers were both a fertility increasing medicine and a part that's normally just thrown away, Hidemasa-san secretly went to steal them. The young antlers were surprisingly easy to snap off after applying a bit of force. But then he got thinking. If only the antlers were missing, it would be easy to tell what they were used for. In the unlikely event that his brother-in-law and his wife found out, it would be very bad. So, he immediately decided to decapitate the deer. He'd been asked to do it several times in the past. He knew where the tools were. However, upon returning to his house, Hidemasa-san felt overwhelmingly guilty when faced with the deer's head.

"I know it was already dead, but… It didn't feel right to have a kid with this kind of method."

He hadn't killed it himself, and he had no problem eating its meat. He was originally just going to throw the rest away, but

decided he shouldn't waste it. He kept telling himself that, but when he looked into those dark eyes, he couldn't bring himself to do it.

"Besides… Isn't Youko kind of like a deer? I don't mean it in a bad way, just because female deer are so beautiful. I really get why they're thought of as messengers of gods. I love venison, and I don't condemn hunting, but that time, I had to be selfish."

No matter how famous a herbal remedy may be, there's no guarantee that it's harmless. So, he snuck off and got rid of the head in the mountains. He didn't end up doing anything, but he dejectedly confesses about the stealing and his intentions.

"You should have just said that from the beginning instead of making us go on this goose chase!" Youko-neechan says while blushing, not because of the alcohol, but because of her husband's confession. I'm not sure if she's angry, embarrassed, or both.

"I thought you'd get angry if I suddenly said I wanted a kid, Youko…"

"You're making it sound like I'm always mad at you!" Youko-neechan says angrily.

Hidemasa-san ducks and covers his head in fear. Aki-neechan pats Youko-neechan's shoulder to calm her down.

"We always fight because you never talk about important things…! If you just spoke up, I'd…" Youko-neechan stops yelling, and her ears turn red. Her voice becomes softer and quieter.

"…Aren't they just flirting now?" My brother mutters. Everyone that had been watching them argue starts to laugh.

"Keep it PG in front of the kids!" My grandpa says with a big sigh as he gets up to leave the room.

He signals for my brother and I to follow him. I'm reluctant to comply, since I'm not really a kid.

"Youko-nee is the same as always." My brother grumbles as we head to the detached house where my grandpa stays.

I'm glad that Hidemasa-san wasn't cheating on his wife. I might even have a new family member next time I come to visit.

Final part

My grandpa's room has a nostalgic smell. It smells like old books and incense. By the time I was born, my "hunting grandma" had already passed away, but grandpa still thinks about her every day. How much does someone have to love another person to still keep loving them decades after they already passed away?

"Assembling a skeleton means you have to take apart the corpse first,"My grandpa says.

He asks me to pour room temperature kumazasa tea for everyone. Sakurako-san seems to approve of the tea. It has a gentle, grassy scent and a light sweetness. Kumazasa tea has a lighter flavour than regular tea. It's not the best tea I've ever had, but it's not bitter, and apparently it's good for you.

"I'll give you something nice. After all, it's thanks to you that I'll get to see my great grandchild. Let me show you my gratitude," My grandpa says before pulling a small box out of a locked cabinet and giving it to Sakurako-san.

"…What is it?"

The old, wooden box is about 30 centimeters long. Solving the case with the deer head brought back some of her energy, but Sakurako-san has been quiet lately (maybe scared?). She looks at my grandpa slightly doubtfully as she opens the box.

"It's my most prized possession. I sent it off to be sharpened recently, so it's in usable condition."

Inside the box is a single knife. The handle is crafted from an antler.

"An acquaintance made it for me. It has a 10 centimeter, hamaguri edge blade. It's made for butchering game, so it's easy to use."

"Don't you need it?"

"I'm not strong enough to use it anymore. It's important to me… but tools are meant to be used. I'm glad to give it to the young lady."

Sakurako-san's eyes are shining with delight as she holds the knife.

"It's smaller than I expected."

The total length is a little over 20 centimeters.

“Isn’t it too small to dismantle something like a deer?” My brother asks.

I used to feel the same way in the past. This is normal for hunting knives, though. A large knife would violate the Swords and Firearms Control Act, and wouldn’t really be better. Sakurako-san even uses surgical scalpels on small animals. Scalpel blades are disposable, so you don’t have to worry about sharpening them.

“I thought it’d be a bit too big for a woman, but you have large hands. It should be easy for you to use.”

“The size is perfect. It has a nice weight, too.”

Sakurako-san and my grandpa smile at each other. It looks dangerous, but of course the knife isn’t going to be used for anything illegal.

“Then you aren’t going to hunt deer anymore, grandpa?” My brother asks disappointedly while trying out the brand new massage chair.

As our grandpa stopped hunting, we’ve had less and less opportunities to eat venison. Aki-neechan sends us some once or twice during winter, but as you’d expect, my grandpa just can’t anymore. Even if I’m craving it, I can’t ask.

“I don’t have the strength or stamina, and most of all, I’m worried about those around me. As I’ve gotten older, I feel like my judgment has dulled. I’ve already turned in my gun license.”

He used to hunt bears, as well as deer. Every now and then, you hear on the news that someone accidentally shot another person while hunting… Hunting can be very dangerous if someone makes a mistake. I hear on the news all the time that there are less and less hunters every year. Here in Hokkaido, the mountains have large carnivores like bears wandering around, so it’s a problem that can’t just be ignored. Besides dealing with bears that try to leave the mountains, hunters also instill a fear of humans in the bears, so they’re scared of wandering into cities. Some people think of hunting as barbaric, cruel, and dangerous, but I think I’d like to go hunting when I grow up. I’m not sure if I’m capable of actually taking an animal’s life, though.

“What’s with that disappointed look on your face? Don’t worry, I have something for you, too,” my grandpa says. He hands me a letter opener made from a deer antler, and three matching owl keychains.

“Are you leaving early tomorrow?”

“Yeah, as soon as we’re done with breakfast. We’re planning on heading to Abashiri next. I haven’t decided whether to go through Akan or Rikubetsu, though.”

“Well, they both take about the same amount of time.”

My grandpa pulls out a map to look at with my brother. It’s a relatively new map. A very old looking map on the shelf catches my eye.

“…Chou… Da…”

Lots of butterflies. (Chouda is written with the symbols of butterfly and many) How do you read this? It has to be Chouda. Lots of places in Hokkaido have names that are hard to read, or the pronunciation is nothing like what you’d expect. I would have no idea how to read Chipurankeushi if someone hadn’t told me. But the kanji for Chouda brings back memories of that swarm of dirt-coloured butterflies. Diantha treebrown, the sinister butterfly that seeks out the dead.

“Oh, Chouda? It got its name from the Ainu language. The kanji were picked for their pronunciation, rather than their meaning. It doesn’t exist anymore now, though. Chouda is what they called the area with Ikeda and Makubetsu back in the Meiji area. Chouda mountain is in Otofuke now.”

“I see… I wonder if it really does have a lot of butterflies.”

“Some people think that the kanji for butterfly was chosen because of the butterflies there, but the name came from the Ainu word ceota, meaning a place where people eat, or a place with lots of food. It was adapted into the surname Chiyoda, which is still pretty common around Hokkaido.”

“Chiyoda, huh?”

It’s certainly true that Shouko-san blesses me with lots of food. From there, the conversation moved onto interesting names, particularly rivers with odd names. There’s “Unbearable River” (in the Ainu language,it means “river without fish,” it has a really sad origin),

“Money Lending River”, “Dangerous River”, and “No Money River”. A lot of them say “No (nai) ” because it means “river”, but it makes a lot of them have funny names. There’s also a lot of theories about where the name Kamishihorocho, where my grandpa’s house is located, came from, but the consensus seems to be that it means “a vast land”. It’s true that there’s a lot of space here. Expanses seem to go on forever. Even though I’m from here, it still amazes me how big Hokkaido is.

While we’re talking, Aki-neechan comes to get us. The bath is free and our beds are set up. Youko-neechan and her husband seem to have gone home. After returning to the main house and having a bath, my aunt tells Sakurako-san she didn’t eat enough, and warms up some leftovers from dinner. Sakurako-san insists she doesn’t like to eat late at night. I keep glancing at her hair. She never dries it properly after she has a bath.

“What if you catch a cold while we’re on a trip?”

I take her to the living room and blow dry her dark hair. I’m borrowing Aki-neechan’s expensive blow dryer. It even made my hair all soft, so since Sakurako-san already has beautiful hair, it should end up nice and glossy.

Listening to the rumbling of the machine reminds me of Hector. I suddenly feel lonely. That big, white fluff ball has already gone back to the Kujou house. Even though I know he’s happiest with Sakurako-san, his real owner, I’m terribly lonely without that big, spoiled baby. Feeling slightly frustrated, I aim the air stream at her face. She closes her eyes and shakes her head back and forth. She’s like a dog.

“Geez… Until what age are you going to have other people dry your hair?”

I brush her hair while Sakurako-san sits on a soft bean bag chair. She laughs.

“Naoe always says the same thing.”

“Oh… I guess he would.”

Ariwara-san does this, too! Thinking about that makes my chest sting for a moment. They have a relationship where they dry each other’s hair after a bath. Even to the point where she said “always”.

“Thanks. Good night.”

With a smile that says she’s completely oblivious to how I’m feeling, Sakurako-san returns to her room with her dry hair. My brother, who was watching us while drinking a beer, heaves a single sigh.

“…What?”

“You really do like her, huh?”

“Huh? What are you talking about? She already has a significant other- a fiancé in fact…”

I answer while staring at my toes as I sit cross legged. There’s still an imprint on the cushion from where Sakurako-san was sitting until a moment ago.

“There’s no way it could work out, and it’s not like that in the first place…”

It’d be immoral, there’s no place for me, and besides, this is Sakurako-san we’re talking about.

“Hmm.”

I get a completely disinterested response. I don’t know why he even bothered to ask.

“Don’t say anything weird to Sakurako-san, okay?”

“What do you mean?”

“Like your unfounded suspicion.”

“Aw, but you l—“

“I don’t love her!”

I accidentally raise my voice. I turn toward my brother suddenly, bumping his hand and causing him to spill his beer.

“Ah, geez! What are you doing, I just had a shower!”

“I don’t care! You started it!”

He angrily goes to take another shower. In the end, we both went to bed without finishing the conversation. Honestly, why did he even suggest going on a trip if he’s going to be so angry. Sure, I’m the one that invited Sakurako-san… But he didn’t even have anywhere in mind, he just made me make all the plans.

“…”

I look over at my brother. I can tell from his breathing that he’s already asleep. He must be tired from driving for so long.

“…Seriously, why?”

The more I think about it, the more strange this trip is. It’s unusual for my brother to be so spontaneous. He’s not a reckless or haphazard person. He’s more like the type to pull me around than let me pull him around. So why did he want to take me on this trip?

“Man… I wonder what’s going to happen tomorrow.”

I let a sigh spill. I sincerely hope tomorrow is a little more calm. But I’ve forgotten something. When Sakurako-san and I are together, a dead body always appears.

Second bone: Juliet’s Confession

Part 1

For breakfast at my grandpa’s house, we have pancakes with clotted cream and milk jam made by a cafe that’s run by ranch owners. Sakurako-san is in a good mood because of it. I feel energized afterwards. I must have been an ant in a past life.

My brother and I got into a bit of an argument last night. He hasn’t blatantly ignored or insulted me this morning, but he’s clearly in a bad mood. Thanks to him, I’m not feeling so good today.

We decide to go back to Ashoro city, then head to Abashiri through Akan. It’s a coastal town, famous for having Abashiri prison there. Even when I go fishing, I usually only go to the ocean on the left side of Hokkaido.

“This is actually my first time visiting Abashiri.”

“I came here a few times when I was little,” Sakurako-san says.

I’m excited to visit a place I’ve never been to before, even if it’s just to see some bones.

“I’d like to try digging for clams in lake Notoroko.”

There aren’t many places in Hokkaido where you can dig for clams. When I was little, I used to visit my mom’s relatives in Esashi, and I’d dig up basket clams for miso soup with them. It was fun and delicious, so I’d like to try it again. Unfortunately, we’d have to take the tide into account, and they probably wouldn’t be good anymore

by the time we got back to Asahikawa. Fishing season ends next week, too, so there probably wouldn't be many clams left.

On the way, we stop at the Aioi roadside station, and check out the bear themed taiyaki place. My brother gets a "brown bear" with anko, I get a "polar bear" with tapioca flour on the outside, and Sakurako-san gets a "cream bear" with cream inside. After just over two hours of traveling, we arrive in Abashiri. Along the way, I thought I saw a black kite flying overhead, but it turned out to be a white-tailed eagle. I'm surprised at how big eastern Hokkaido is. I can't believe there's such big birds of prey just flying around here.

Abashiri is a bigger town than I expected. The town is long and narrow, since it was built along the coast. It reminds me of Wakkanai, but maybe a bit more lively. The blue sky against the sea is beautiful. I'm glad the weather is nice. I love port cities. Towns by the sea like Hakodate, Otaru, and Mashike have a unique feel to them. The town I grew up in wasn't by the sea, so maybe I put too much stock in it.

At my brother's request we had seafood for lunch before heading to the trip's main event: the Abashiri Folk Museum. The road to the museum is really twisty as it heads toward the mountains. The facility is smaller than I expected. The building has a unique, retro atmosphere, though. I'm pretty excited. There's a large semicircle above the front entrance, and I can see a red dome roof behind it. It's a lovely building. As I'm taking some pictures with my phone, Sakurako-san gets impatient and yells at me to hurry up. As soon as I step inside, I'm thrilled with the sound the floor makes, and the peculiar, old scent of the building.

Light pours in through the stained glass at the top of the stairs. Unfortunately, the spiral staircase that leads to the dome is blocked off. The permanent exhibits include taxidermy of animals that live in Abashiri, the history of the area's development, and pottery, among others. It's quite compact inside, so it gives off the impression that everything is tightly packed inside. I find it exciting and fun. It's like a toy box for adults.

"The taxidermy is so cool," my brother mumbles.

The white tailed eagle I saw earlier is as big as a dinosaur now that I'm seeing it up close. I'm astonished by the gigantic turtle that's

covering an entire wall. The cute marine mammals really feel like wild “beasts” from up close. I get to touch the sea otter’s splendid coat.

“Giovanni’s father risked everything when he left to go fishing,” my brother murmurs.

“Giovanni?”

“From Kenji Miyazawa’s Night on the Galactic Railroad. Giovanni’s father was caught poaching and couldn’t come home, so Giovanni desperately took work at the print shop to support his mother. Didn’t you read it as a kid?”

“Well… It was sad so I didn’t like it.”

A child without a father was too heavy of a subject for me when I was young.

“…”

My brother smacks me on the back of the head, then goes toward the inner room that Sakurako-san disappeared into. Apparently that’s where the bone exhibit is.

“Wow…”

Just like the other rooms, the exhibition room is packed to the brim with skeletal specimens. Birds, beasts, marine animals, and bugs. There’s a superb pair of male and female deer skulls, along with the skull of a fawn. There’s even an entire brown bear skeleton! I’m surprised at how large and complete the bone exhibit feels, even though it’s on such a small scale. Or rather, it’s really fun. Of course Sakurako-san is, but even I’m super pumped up about it.

“An owl! Its bones are so long and thin.”

There’s an Ural owl skeleton suspended from the ceiling, posed to look as if it’s about to catch a prey item. Sakurako-san is absolutely lovestruck by the ezo flying squirrel and Asian particoloured bat specimens. She seems like she’d be more into large creatures, but she actually really likes making specimens of small animals like those. The squirrels all look the same, except the slightly-less-cute Hokkaido red squirrel, which has bigger bones. The tiny squirrels with delicate bones are a lot cuter. They have cute hands, though. The coolest ones are the bird skeletons. I find their skulls really fascinating. I’ve seen plenty of skeletons at Sakurako-

san’s house, but I don’t normally take the time to inspect each one like this.

For about an hour, the two of us thoroughly examine and admire all the bones. As soon as I notice my brother is missing, I hurriedly search for him, only to find him happily chatting with the receptionist.

“Sorry…”

I drag Sakurako-san back to my brother while she grumbles that she wasn’t done looking.

“It’s fine if you want to keep looking, but…” My brother sounds like he’s given up, and is shrouded in a dissatisfied aura.

“Do you not like skeletons?”

“I’m amazed at the size of the big ones, but the small ones are just… there.”

“Really? I think it’s neat to see all the tiny details in the small skeletons, and think about how they work. Like a machine or something.”

The big skeletons are awesome, but the small ones are cool, too.

“Look how long this owl’s legs are. You can’t tell normally because they’re so fluffy.”

“I guess so…”

He’s always loved building plastic models, so why doesn’t he have any interest in bones? Is it because he didn’t assemble them himself? When I actually tried putting a skeleton together for the first time, I thought it was amazing, and I learned a lot. I realized partway through that I’m no different from Sakurako-san and Sawa-san.

“I thought you’d like this place, since you like machines and all…”

“I like machines better. I can never tell how close I should get with living things.”

“Really? But it seems like living things tend to like you.”

Even dogs seem to get attached to him in no time.

“Machines will always love you, as long as you take care of them.”

“Heh.” Sakurako-san laughs a bit after listening to our conversation.

“…What’s so funny?”

My brother glares at Sakurako-san, since he feels like he’s being made fun of.

“It’s nothing. I just think the two of you are similar in how you view ‘love.’”

“You love bones, don’t you?” My brother asks angrily.

“Yes, I do, but I don’t seek love from the subjects of my research.”

I can see my brother’s stress level rising before my eyes.

We stop in at the Hokkaido Museum of the Northern Peoples to learn about the lives and history of the people of Hokkaido and Siberia before meeting up with Shouko-san at the hotel. We all hardly speak to each other the whole time. The hotel is built on the shore of Lake Abashiri. It’s decorated with beautiful embroidery. I can tell from the way my brother is looking at me that he’s thinking “won’t this be expensive?” Shouko-san says she can cover the cost as payment for “babysitting Saa-chan,” but my brother refuses. I think the cost is higher than what he’s expecting, though. Shouko-san had already checked in, so I introduce my brother to her while she’s drinking matcha tea in the hotel lounge. She sounds delighted.

“You’re pretty easy on the eyes!” Shouko-san pats his upper arm. He looks at me for help.

“You’re good as you are, but I feel like I could polish you up even better. Itsuki-kun is handsome, too, but it’s annoying that he’s aware of it, so he’s hard to hang out with.”

“Shouko-san…”

In the middle of the confusion, he wraps her arms around my brother and I and leads us to our room. Isozaki-sensei does look pretty cool, though. But, well, it can’t be helped. She’s our benefactor for tonight. Besides, she came all this way for Sakurako-san. The least I can do is let her relax.

“You’re very kind. I’m a bit jealous of your little brother. I don’t have any siblings and my husband didn’t get along with his brother, so I hardly even know my brother in law.”

“If you go back to your parents’ house, I’m sure you’ll find lots of people close enough to be considered your siblings,” Sakurako-san says, referring to the Toudou family.

Shouko-san has a displeased expression.

“Oh, but you wouldn’t be able to go on this nice trip if it weren’t for them. Maybe say thank you instead, next time.”

They’ve known each other for a long time. Sakurako-san is Ariwara-san’s fiancée, as well as the grandchild of Shouko-san’s grandfather’s close friend. I think the reason Sakurako-san cherishes Shouko-san so much isn’t only due to Shouko-san’s kindness, but also because of loneliness. She loved her younger brother so much, so maybe she eventually decided to treat Shouko-san as a sister. Perhaps it’s precisely because they’re not blood related that Shouko-san loves Sakurako-san so much. Blood is thicker than water. For Shouko-san, that thickness is a chain that binds her. Sakurako-san, who believes that water is thicker than blood, is a blade she can use to sever those chains.

“What’s wrong?”

I didn’t realize I was staring at her. Shouko-san smiles.

“Nothing…”

Which am I? Water or blood? I look back and forth between my brother, who’s not even trying to his sullenness, and Sakurako-san, who does everything at her own pace. I’m happy that Sakurako-san came on this trip. Traveling with my brother is a new experience, and I’m grateful he took me all the way here - but he’s so irritated and seems unwell. Maybe I’m the reason, and maybe I’m mad at the wrong person, but being with someone so angry is really bringing me down. However, I’m sure his melancholy will be blown away the instant he sees the room Kouji-san prepared for us.

“We’re in the room next door. Take a breather first. You must be tired from driving, right, Atsushi-kun?”

With that said, Shouko-san and Sakurako-san disappear into their room. It’s just my brother and I now. The room is so big that it feels wasted on just two people. There’s a large TV with a sofa set, a small bar counter with a built-in bench, and a window with a panoramic view of Lake Abashiri. The bedroom is separate from the

main room. The bath is made of Cyprus, and uses water from a hot spring.

"…"

"It's a beautiful room. You can see all of Lake Abashiri."

While my brother silently looks around the room, I unpack our luggage and grab the coffee grinder. At Kouji-san's hotels, they always let you grind your own coffee beans.

"Is something wrong? Why don't you sit down?"

I make some coffee for my brother to thank him for driving me, but he doesn't seem like he wants to sit on the couch.

"No…"

This is a really nice room. There's no way either of us could normally stay in a room that costs tens of thousands of yen per night. It's clear that he isn't comfortable and doesn't like the room.

"…Okay, what the hell is your problem? You've been acting gloomy this whole trip. If something's bothering you, speak up!"

"I just-"

As soon as he opens his mouth, the intercom rings, causing us to both jump in surprise. Before we even have a chance to answer, they start ringing repeatedly. Ah, it must be Sakurako-san. I open the door, though I'm not sure if I should wait for my brother to finish speaking first.

"There's somewhere I want to go," Sakurako-san says with a wide smile.

"And where's that?"

"It's a museum, it isn't far from here. It's small, but I went there before when I was little. The director is my uncle's mentor."

She can only smile like that because she has no idea what's going on between my brother and I. Actually, she has probably noticed but just doesn't care. Anyway, I'm interested in checking out this museum owned by Shitara-sensei's mentor.

"Umm…" I turn back to look at my brother.

"…I don't mind. I don't feel comfortable in this room, anyway."

He picks up his jacket with a big sigh. I feel guilty that we're just doing what Sakurako-san wants, even though this was supposed to be a trip with my brother…

Part 2

The “Abashiri human history museum” is a tiny museum located near Lake Abashiri. It seems to be an old building that was dismantled and rebuilt in another spot. It reminds me of the museum in Higashikawa. I’m pretty sure the building next to it is an old town hall that’s been repurposed. This building has western style architecture, so it looks more like the Kujou house than the other museums we visited. It even smells the same on the inside. It smells time-worn. Unlike the Kujou house, this place is quite lively.

They seem to be holding an event for the consecutive holidays. Today’s events are “lighting fire the old fashioned way” and “making jomon pottery.” They’re hands-on events to get kids interested. Apparently this facility is trying to get more kids interested in academic subjects. There’s a bulletin board in the middle of the foyer covered in origami and fall themed decorations. There’s an event schedule for this month and next month, and a poster for a lecture aimed at kids called “let’s listen to Dr. XX!”

“I don’t mean to be rude, but it feels like there’s a lot of museums in this part of the country, despite how small the towns are. Like… It’s really museum dense.”

“Yes, there are. Humans are always driven by the desire to ‘learn.’ If the objects of interest are different, people will naturally want to learn more.”

“I definitely want to try making jomon pottery,” my brother says when he sees the kids playing with clay. He’s following along behind us, looking bored.

“It’s a shame that it’s only for elementary school kids.”

I wanted to try it, too, but the poster was clear that only elementary school aged kids can participate.

“…Go insist that you’re in grade 6. I’ll just tell them I’m your guardian,” my brother says, lightly patting me on the head.

“Then you’ll be my dad and Sakurako-san will be my mom? No way, that’ll never work. There’s way too many issues.”

I'd understand if he said I should pretend to be a middle schooler, but an elementary school kid… Sakurako-san crosses her arms and looks me up and down.

"I think if you tell them confidently, they'll believe you."

"I don't want them to believe me!"

That's just mean! I'd normally be offended, but it's so rare to see my brother and Sakurako-san laughing together that my dissatisfaction fades away. Joking around earlier and the sound of children playing lightens the mood considerably. We may not be talking to each other, but I feel better about going on this trip now. I want both of them to be smiling. Sakurako-san, as well as my brother.

With a pamphlet from the reception desk in hand, the three of us head to the permanent exhibit. I don't mean to be rude, but the contents of the exhibits aren't very different from the other museums we went to. Everyday tools, such as fish hooks, carved out of animal bones, items excavated from kitchen middens… Still, I can feel how much effort they put into displaying everything as clearly as possible. Of course, there's a large amount of bones here. I have a hunch I know why Sakurako-san wanted to come here. My brother seems sick of it, though.

"Romeo and Juliet from 300 years ago, huh…"

Along with the flavor text "Two people torn apart", there's a space the size of two tatami mats with a pair of skeletons holding each other. They're sets of skeletons that were excavated about 100 years ago near Lake Notoro. The corpses are thought to be around 300 years old. The display recreates the position they were in when they were found. The bones themselves are replicas, but all the ornaments are actual excavated items.

"Beaches with lots of coral mixed into the sand will have a large amount of calcium, causing bones to deteriorate slower."

It reminds me of the skull we found in Mashike before. It was when I first met Yamaji-san. The explanation says that they were found in remarkably good condition. Since the two bodies were

found wearing clothes from different villages, it's suspected that they committed suicide because their love was forbidden.

"They wanted to be together, even in death…" My brother mumbles.

"When you die, it's all over."

"Yeah… But we can't know that for sure."

I don't know anything about the thoughts or lives of these two people, but couldn't they have just run away together? My brother seems to be thinking the same thing. If I were in a situation where I loved someone so much that it was a matter of life or death, what would I choose to do? I'd want my loved ones to keep living, even if I died. I'd want her to have a happy future, even if I'm not part of it. I'd want my death to serve as nourishment for a cherry blossom tree to grow even more beautiful flowers. I look at Sakurako-san. I'm sure if I tried to explain that to her, she'd just tell me it's "nonsense."

"…What's the matter?"

Sakurako-san is staring at the exhibit with an unusual intensity. Maybe the story of a tragic lover's suicide touched her a bit. I thought she'd be heading off to the next exhibit already, but she looks truly captivated by the sorrowful display. Is it really *that* interesting?

"Well… It's a pretty generic story. It's cool that it's 300 years old, but…" I start to say.

"Boy!"

Sakurako-san violently wraps herself around my arm.

"W-what's wrong? You're hurting me."

"Lend me your shoulder."

"Huh?"

"Your shoulder. Actually, give me a shoulder ride."

"What?"

"I need to see this exhibit from above."

"Come on," Sakurako-san says, holding her arms out wide.

"Huh? Uh… But, like, here…?"

Rather than "here?" it's more like "in front of my brother?" My ears instantly feel hot from embarrassment. Well, I've given her a shoulder ride a few times before, and I feel bad about declining since it's so rare for her to want to be close or touch another person, but—

“Sitting on your shoulders somewhere else wouldn’t be much help, would it? Wait, actually, Atsushi, you’d be better.”

“Huh?”

Just as I’m about to be burdened with the role of shoulder ride duty, Sakurako-san turns to my brother.

“Why me?”

“You’re taller. I need to see the exhibit from above. Lend me your shoulders.”

“For real…?” My brother and I shout at the same time. Our complaints are the same, but their meanings are a bit different.

Sakurako-san is so eager, though. My brother glances at me for realizing he can’t get out of this… and accepts her demand. It would have been better if he’d refused. He crouches on the floor, then lifts Sakurako-san high into the air. I’m suddenly flooded with memories of watching fireworks by Ishikari river from my brother’s shoulders when I was in kindergarten.

“Don’t move, stay there.”

“You’re kind of… no, you’re really weird, you know!”

However this time, the rider isn’t a child, but a full grown woman. She hasn’t been eating properly lately, likely because of gran’s situation. Her bones are showing through her skin, so naturally, she isn’t too heavy.

“Hm, a lover’s suicide, huh…”

My brother doesn’t care about what she’s looking at one bit. He has a pained expression as Sakurako-san relentlessly gives orders like “stop trembling” and “take one step to the left.”

“Boy, give me your phone,” she soon asks, reaching her hand down to me.

“My phone?”

As soon as I hand it over, she starts taking pictures. Photography is allowed here, but… Despite my unease, Sakurako-san continues capturing the two corpses from all angles.

“The bones are replicas, though…” I think to myself as I also examine the display.

They’re buried in some kind of white, gypsum-like material to simulate the soil where they were found. They’re discoloured and

dirty in some places, but there's no way real bones this old would be so beautiful. Bones are only white when they're degreased and bleached. If that were performed on old bones, they'd break down in no time. That's why there's no doubt that these are replicas.

I look at the waist of the skeleton in front of me. The corpse's pelvis is poking through the worn out fabric. It's dull and faded now, but I can tell from the careful embroidery that it used to be vibrant. The pelvis has a gentle slope to it, but it's quite wide, so… This must have been a woman. I can't see the other person's pelvis, but the whole skeleton looks more angular and stronger than the woman's. He must have been rather muscular while he was alive.

"A lover's suicide…" Sakurako-san mutters to herself. "No, these two… Even if they died together, they should have suspected the alternative…"

"Hm?"

"I can see a fracture on the man's thyroid cartilage. It's from compression… He was strangled."

"What…?"

"And look here, at the base of the woman's teeth. There's some faint discolouration from deterioration. It could be a sign of long-term violent abuse. When a strong force hits the teeth, the tooth's nerves die and cause inflammation in the surrounding bone. If it isn't treated properly, it leaves marks like this."

"Then you're saying… One of them was strangled, and the other was being abused?"

"That's right. I can't tell if the abuse was the cause of death, but it could have something to do with it."

"…"

What a horrible story. I cover my mouth with my hand.

"Wait, this is a replica, isn't it? Couldn't it just be a mistake when they recreated it…?"

Sakurako-san laughs at my brother's question.

"This isn't a replica," she declares.

"Huh? But…"

No, that can't be. These bones are…

“Oh, you’re right about the rest of it being a replica, but the skull is different. It’s from a real human skeleton.”

“No way…”

A chill runs up my spine. I’m not afraid of bones or anything, but it’s creepy knowing that only the skull is real.

“But can old bones really be such a nice colour like these ones?”

“You’re right. The bones wouldn’t be in such good condition. At the very least, the shape of the lower jaw bones doesn’t indicate them being 300 years old. I’d have to look up the exact figures, but just from eyeballing it, these bones are at most… Around ten to twenty years old.”

“Wait, you’re… joking, right?”

I can see the colour draining from my brother’s face. Unfortunately, Sakurako-san isn’t the kind of person who would joke about this, and she doesn’t misread bones.

“This is quite an innovative exhibition,” Sakurako-san says, looking up at the two skulls.

I don’t think they were going for “innovative”. I sigh as Sakurako-san hands me my phone back. I don’t want to have to report this.

“F-first we should talk to the museum curator. Yeah, let’s start there!”

Now that he mentions it, I guess there’s no need for me to call the police. Sakurako-san doesn’t look like she wants to let anyone know.

“As long as no one notices, it’s not a problem.”

“It’s a huge problem!”

I try to stop Sakurako-san from grumbling about how “It’ll just be a pain to deal with!” and “if we leave it alone we can enjoy it at our leisure next time!” while my brother hurries off to fetch the curator. Geez, this always happens. Even with my brother, and at a museum in a distant city, corpses are always found where Sakurako-san and I go.

Part 3

My brother drags Andou-san, the curator, over and frantically tries to explain that “these are real bones!” She appears friendly and smiling at first, but I can tell when she glances between my brother and I that she’s scoffing at us. I think she must be around 50 years old? It’s hard to tell through her heavy makeup, but she’s pretty.

“There’s no way these can be real human bones, ufufu,” she says, carefully looking over the Romeo and Juliet exhibit.

I can tell she’s thinking “you’re already an adult and you can’t tell the difference between a replica and the real thing?”

“It’s just an extremely accurate replica. The former curator was an expert in bones, after all.”

“Even if that were the case, it doesn’t change the fact that these skeletons definitely aren’t from 300 year old remains.”

The curator clearly thinks we’re off our rockers.

“Of course they look new, the replicas aren’t that old. The real bones don’t look this nice.”

“That’s why I said it was weird. Why are only the skulls real, especially when they’re from recent remains?”

“Like I said, they’re not real…”

Sakurako-san calmly repeats her explanation, while Andou-san gets angrier by the second. She was treating us like idiots before, but eventually the smile disappears from her face.

“No way… It couldn’t be…”

“If you still don’t get it, call over someone who does! This is going nowhere.”

Andou-san leaves to bring over another curator, clearly displeased. Two male curators rush over to us. They must have just finished the jomon pottery event, since they’re holding dirty aprons. Sakurako-san has no choice but to explain her findings for the third time today. Fortunately, these two seem to know more about bones than Andou-san. They bring over the step ladder and carefully examine the skull.

“Uh oh…” Hata-san, a young curator in his mid 20s, says.

“What do you mean ‘uh oh’…?”

“I can’t believe it… I see this thing every day.”

Shouji-san, a curator around my mom’s age, almost falls off the step ladder in surprise.

“This exhibit is only around 15 years old. The year before last was the museum’s 15th anniversary, so I’m sure of it. This exhibit only needs basic cleaning and maintenance… I never thought someone could possibly replace the skulls…”

Shouji-san rubs his chin, apparently forgetting that his hands are muddy.

“Yeah… It was most likely replaced when the exhibit was being installed.”

“Then… Does that mean the former curator is the culprit? Did he murder someone? No way! This is scary!”

“You’re jumping to conclusions. Honestly, you used to be able to buy real human remains online from overseas. These are certainly relatively recent bones, but we can’t conclude that they’re of illegal origin yet.”

Andou-san’s having a slightly exaggerated reaction, causing her whole body to tremble.

“Even if they’re genuine bones, we don’t know if it was an accident or a crime. Sure, the former curator was a bit odd, but…”

Hata-san sighs.

“Well… Either way, we can’t contact the former curator. Geez, this has turned into a pain.”

Andou-san heaves a big sigh.

“You can’t contact him? Why? Did Nishio-sensei die?” Sakurako-san seems surprised, and presses Andou-san for an answer.

“Oh, did you know him? Well, he hasn’t passed away yet, but it’s only a matter of time. He has advanced dementia. He’s living in a care facility near Sapporo.”

“I see… It’s true, he’s quite old…”

She doesn’t speak very respectfully about the person who used to be her boss. I sort of understand, though. If Sakurako-san calls him “Nisho-sensei,” he was probably pretty weird.

“I helped a bit with putting this together… Back then, at least, I’m quite sure the bones were replicas.”

“Isn’t Shouji-san the real culprit?”

Shouji-san gives Hata-san a slight nudge for that comment.

“In that case, isn’t Yoshimine-san the most suspicious? She helped with making the exhibit from start to finish… Oh!” Andou-san starts to say something, but cuts herself off and nods at her own statement. “Either way, we can’t ask her, either. She’s dead.”

“Since when?” Sakurako-san asks. Andou-san sighs again.

“Who knows? It was quite a while ago… I just happened to hear about her death, anyway.”

“You seem very uninterested considering she was your coworker.”

“I am uninterested… She and I had nothing to do with each other. We weren’t close at all,” Andou-san says, shrugging. Shouji-san smiles wryly.

“She was an office worker who did odd jobs… We really didn’t talk much. Just the bare minimum amount of conversation to do our work. The only person she was close to was the former curator. Apparently she was interested in bones, too.”

“Oh, but I think she quit a year or two after this place was remodeled. The new office lady said it caused her a lot of trouble, since she just suddenly stopped showing up,” Hata-san continues the story from where Shouji-san leaves off. Andou-san is glaring at us the whole time.

“This is none of their business, there’s no reason to tell them any of this!” Andou-san is clearly annoyed by us. What happened to the friendly woman from earlier?

I suspect it’s because we noticed the problem with the exhibit, but she didn’t. From the curators’ perspective, this is a huge problem that has suddenly been forced on them. Andou-san leaves to help another guest. Shouji-san and Hata-san put a cloth over the exhibit and put up a sign saying it’s undergoing repairs.

“Then… Should we leave?” I say. It’s not like there’s anything else we can do. Sakurako-san turns and glares at me.

“What? But we don’t know anything about these bones yet!”

“So? That’s the museum’s problem, not ours. We don’t have the right to poke our noses into it.”

She reluctantly listens to me.

“Well, I don’t think it was the result of a crime, so… I’ll just check the remains quickly to see if they need to be reported to the authorities. The back room is actually a complete mess… We don’t know all of what’s back there. This will be a good opportunity to organize it,” Shouji-san says. He walks with us back to the entrance.

It’s definitely hard to tell whether this incident is criminal in nature, given the location.

“That sounds tough. I’d love to see the collection, though,” I say to Shouji-san before leaving.

It’s an honest wish. I remember helping sort the science prep room when I found Natsuko-san’s remains. Organizing was kind of fun, and I learned a lot.

“It’s been a long time coming, but we’re finally almost ready to open a special exhibit. Come see it once it’s open.” Shouji-san forces a smile. “Well, I don’t know what’s going to happen after all of this… So please keep this a secret.”

Shouji-san explains how it would impact the investigation if word about this got out before the police knew. I think he’s mostly worried about the museum’s reputation. Word spreads quickly on social media.

I look over at the children playing in the playground in front of the museum, blissfully unaware of what’s inside. Who could hide human remains in a place where children will see? I wonder if my brother feels the same way.

“Don’t worry, we won’t tell anyone,” I say to Shouji-san with a slight bow.

The only one displeased is Sakurako-san.

“Umm…”

“I’ll only keep quiet if you tell me where Yoshimine lived.”

Shouji-san looked troubled by Sakurako-san’s request. Her proposition blindsided him.

“We won’t cause them any trouble. I won’t bother you anymore. In exchange, I want to know just a little bit more about that woman.

You could say it's my hobby."

"…"

"Whether this case is criminal in nature or not, don't you think it's strange to switch the display? If it was the work of Nishio-sensei, it's even stranger, isn't it?"

Shouji-san silently stares at Sakurako-san for a while. The only thing I hear is the sound of a brown eared bulbul calling in the distance, and the rustling trees.

"I'm… Sure it was just a prank. There were a few incidents before he retired…"

"A few incidents?"

"Yes, he basically took over the museum."

Shouji-san eventually decides to speak up. He takes a deep breath. Nishio-sensei was an expert on bones, and used to be a professor at Sapporo university. This museum was originally started to display his personal collection.

"Back then, running this place was just the former director's hobby. It wasn't a place where children enjoyed visiting like it is now. There were hardly any guests at all."

The former director thought that there was no point in having a museum with no visitors, even if it had historical value, so he made his nephew the new director. The nephew became a licensed curator, as his uncle suggested. Once his uncle was hospitalized, he took over the museum in a coup d'état. He wanted to make the museum more lively. A year later, the original director beat his illness, but the changes had already been made. The bones and artifacts were neatly organized and spaced out so it wasn't so cramped, and the exhibits were redone. Shouji-san and Andou-san both worked hard to improve the museum's atmosphere, too. The new director believed that a place for learning should be open to everyone. He only closed the museum one day a week rather than two like before, and started hosting events for parents and children every week. Even with all the visitors from near and far, the one person who never approved of the museum was the former curator.

"He didn't like hearing noisy children… He was a lifelong bachelor and misanthrope… He was really an old fashioned person.

In the end, he made that last exhibit, then entrusted the whole museum to the current director. It was right after the exhibit was finished."

Shouji-san smiles sadly as he looks at the children laughing, their voices even higher than the bulbul's. Unlike Andou-san, Shouji-san seems to have liked the hard-to-please Nishio-sensei.

"Yoshimine-san in particular always sided with the former curator. Just between you and me, things weren't very smooth between her and Andou-san. That's why Yoshimine-san quit just before the former curator resigned."

"What makes you say that?"

"Well, she certainly didn't get along with the rest of us. Still, she was charming enough. Kind of mysterious… She didn't have any experience or qualifications, but she was smart… Anyway, she was intelligent and modest."

Shouji-san looks embarrassed as he praises the woman known as Yoshimine-san. I'm glad that at least he had positive feelings toward her.

"Anyway, she was a rather serious person. Andou-san hated her, and would often bully her. The former director knew about it, so he paid extra close attention to Yoshimine-san. That's why I said before that I didn't think she was the type to stop showing up out of the blue, but… Shouji-san's voice trails off.

"But what?"

"Nothing… There was just a rumour that she committed suicide after leaving the museum, that's why Andou-san was on edge. It was a pretty nasty rumour going around that Andou-san bullied the curator that worked here before Hata-kun until she was forced to quit," he says in a low voice, so the people around us don't overhear.

I can't help but believe him. I don't want to speak ill of someone I hardly know, but I don't like Andou-san very much.

"That's why I thought the former director might have done this as some type of revenge. He must be laughing at us, since it took almost 20 years for someone to notice…"

"Is there really no possibility that this was the work of someone who doesn't work there?"

“I can’t say for sure, of course. There’s lots of people working today since it’s a public holiday, but there’s normally only 2 or 3 staff members on any given day. Security is pretty lax, so there’s a possibility of someone sneaking around.”

Shouji-san shrugs his shoulders, saying that it’s still pretty unlikely.

“If it was someone who worked here, they wouldn’t have to hide it in such a conspicuous spot. They could just put the bones in the storage room where nobody will find them.”

He forces a smile and explains that the storage room is a complete mess.

“Doesn’t that just make this whole situation weirder?”

“Oh! There’s also the possibility that it’s just a replica that’s so well made, even an expert can’t tell the difference. The former director made it, after all.”

Shouji-san says that he knows a lot about bones, but has never met someone who could make replicas as good as the former director.

“I guess so, but…” Sakurako-san groans. “It’s still strange. The exhibit isn’t even factually correct. Even if it isn’t a crime, I want to know who did this and why. First, I want to learn more about this Yoshimine woman,” Sakurako-san says seriously.

She’s more interested in this than usual. Maybe she wants to protect Nishio-sensei’s good name, or something. Of course, when the “bones don’t connect,” that means there’s a dislocation somewhere in the story and she just has to get involved. Shouji-san probably just thinks she cares about Nishio-sensei’s reputation, though.

“Well… Please just be careful not to cause trouble for the family,” he says with a big sigh while he takes out his phone.

“It’s an old address, so I don’t know if it’s still there.”

He emails the address to me. Sakurako-san is looking at him suspiciously.

“Why do you still have the address of a woman who has been dead for over 10 years?” Sakurako-san asks after I get my phone back from Shouji-san.

“Well… I don’t really know.”

He ‘doesn’t know’ why he kept the address of a woman who hasn’t worked here in 15 years? Was he planning to pass it down as a family heirloom or something? It’s definitely weird. He slides his phone back into the pocket over his heart, covering it with his palm. He lets out an embarrassed laugh.

“I know it’s silly, but I felt like if I deleted it… it would be like she never existed.”

My chest feels tight. The ring on his left hand, covering his heart, doesn’t shine anymore.

“I wonder if I’m just trying to preserve my memories of her, like a specimen from the museum or something… Hahaha, I’m just kidding. I just haven’t found the right time to delete it yet. There’s no special meaning to it.”

He laughs again and urges us to head back. I have no idea what his relationship to Yoshimine-san was, or how he felt about her, of course. But even if I never met Sakurako-san again, I’d never delete her contact information. I’d keep it for my whole life. To preserve my time with her in my heart.

Part 4

After we get in the car, Sakurako-san leans over from the back seat.

”S-Sakurako-san?”

Despite my surprise and my brother’s suspicious glances, Sakurako-san starts up the car navigation system.

“…What are you putting in?”

“The address.”

“You don’t have to bother if it’s for the hotel.”

“It’s not. It’s for Yoshimine’s house.”

“I knew it,” my brother mumbles while holding his head like he’s getting a migraine.

Apparently Yoshimine-san’s parents’ house is only 10 minutes from here.

“Let’s just go back to the hotel! I’ve been waiting to try out the open air bath attached to the room!”

“The bath isn’t going anywhere. We’re going.”

The bath might not go anywhere, but time is fleeting. I can’t put my thoughts into words. I feel bad for my brother, but I also want to know more about Yoshimine-san.

“Why are you going through the trouble?”

“Why… Don’t you think it’s strange? Human bones on display like that?”

“You don’t even know if they’re real. The curator said they could just be replicas!”

My brother strikes the steering wheel in a fit of anger. Sakurako-san smiles widely.

“First of all, those weren’t replicas. Second, no matter how sparse security is, it’s no small feat to replace an entire skull without being noticed. You’d have to climb over the barrier.”

In contrast to my brother getting emotional, Sakurako-san replies in an indifferent, matter-of-fact tone.

“So what are you going to do? If it’s a crime, it’s the police’s job. This has nothing to do with any of us!”

“I don’t know how far the police will be willing to pursue the case, or if they’ll even rule it as a crime. Above all, however, it’ll weigh on my mind. I don’t understand. Why go through the effort of displaying the bones? Whose bones are they, in the first place? I don’t feel right leaving things as they are. If it was a crime, I want to know why they took the risk of public notice.”

“Then think about it on your own.”

My brother snorts and cancels the car navigation. Sakurako-san wrinkles her brow deeply, then holds out her hand to my brother.

“The key.”

“What?”

“I’ll drive myself. I’ll drop you two off at the hotel, so lend me your car. Otherwise I’ll have to rent one,” she says.

“…We’re just visiting a bereaved family… That’s not so bad, right? She’s just going to talk to them for a bit, then leave. It’ll really only take 5 minutes.”

I know I can't say anything to change her mind, so I helplessly try to help the two of them reach an understanding. The blame doesn't fall entirely on Sakurako-san.

"I'm sorry, nii-san. I'd be lying if I said I wasn't interested."

"…"

Ignoring my request, he puts his hands on the steering wheel and pulls out of the parking space.

"…Okay, fine! I get it! You seriously only get 5 minutes, though!" He finally says after letting out a big sigh. He abruptly stops the car.

He puts the address back into the navigation system from the recent search history.

"In 300 meters, turn right."

I can't help but smile when I hear the car navigation lady speak.

"Sakurako-san, you're just going to listen when we get to Yoshimine-san's house, okay?"

"Geez… We're absolutely going back to the hotel in an hour!" My brother warns Sakurako-san. "That means you, too," he says, lightly pushing my head to the side.

"I don't mind if you two head back first."

"It's my mom's car and only the family is insured to drive it! I can't let you drive it!"

"Besides, I don't know what you'd do if you were set loose," my brother says as he continues driving where the navigator indicates. The roads weren't very busy and we didn't get lost, so we arrived after 10 minutes, just as the navigator said.

I could tell from the address that it was an apartment rather than a detached house, but it's smaller and older than I expected. I think it's a 2DK or something.

"So this is it, huh…"

We search for the room with the right number. It's on the second floor. After finding it, naturally we discover that there's a different family living there already. The nameplate has a different surname, and there's a tricycle with a handle for an adult to push it along by the door. Sakurako-san and I look at each other.

“What should we do?”

“Let’s talk to the neighbours,” Sakurako-san says, as she walks briskly down the hall.

“Why didn’t you ask the people next door?”

She walked right to one of the rooms, and stopped in front of the corner room furthest back.

“This nameplate has been sun bleached.”

She’s right, the nameplate with “Sakuma” engraved on it is in a position where it’d get hit by the afternoon sun, and it looks worn by time.

“They’re not going to know anything, we should just stop here,” my brother warns from behind us.

Sakurako-san makes a slightly pouty face as she rings the intercom.

“Coming!” A friendly voice immediately calls out. The door opens.

A white haired, elderly woman who appears to be around 70 years old stares back at us. She’s holding a rubber stamp in her hand.

“Um…?”

She keeps a smile on her face as she tilts her head, wondering why we’re here.

“Sorry for coming so suddenly. We actually wanted to ask about Eimi Yoshimine, who used to live in this building.”

We really did show up too abruptly. However, rather than surprise, her eyes widen with delight.

“You… Know about Eimi-chan?”

“We weren’t acquainted, but we’re here on behalf of the former curator of the human history museum,” Sakurako-san lies as easily as she breathes.

My brother frowns, so I put my finger to my lips to tell him not to say anything.

“I see… Eimi-chan said that the director was grumpy, but she loved him… It’s been around 15 years since she died… No, it must have been before they built the campground….”

Sakuma-san is only wearing one sandal, so she leans out the door to welcome us in rather than stepping out. There's a shoebox with a colourful, but dusty, kusudama on top. My brother and I smile at each other, remembering how our grandma used to make them for Tanabata.

"So what do you want to know?"

"As much as you can tell us," Sakurako-san says, leaning against the door before it can fully close.

Sakuma-san shrugs her shoulders. Sakurako-san's request is far too vague.

"Were you close with Yoshimine-san?"

"Yes, we used to play together after school when we were kids. Her mom had to work late, so she had to watch the house alone. Also… Well, there were other things."

"What do you know about her death?"

I'm more interested in those "other things," but Sakurako-san just asks her next question. Sakuma-san's expression grows cloudy.

"Her body hasn't been found, but the police said her odds of survival were low, given the circumstances… At that point, the police wouldn't say whether it was an accident or suicide. They think she drove off the cape at Lake Notoro."

"Do you think it was an accident, or suicide? I want to know your own thoughts."

"There's no way I could know that!"

Sakuma-san is upset by the insensitive question.

"Really? Since you were close, you must have some thoughts on the matter. Or maybe you haven't thought about her death even once over the past 15 years?"

"…"

Sakuma-san covers her mouth and looks away from us. Tears gradually well up in her eyes. There's no way she hasn't thought about Yoshimine-san's death if she still cries over the thought of it after all this time. But it's far too cruel to ask her.

"I'm sorry, we should really-"

I try to intervene, but Sakuma-san holds up her hand to stop me.

“No, it’s fine. It honestly didn’t surprise me when I heard that it could have been suicide.”

Sakuma-san beckons for us to follow her further inside.

“Come inside, there’s no point in standing over here. I got some dango as a gift, but it’s too much for me to finish alone. You’d be helping me out.”

“No, we should really…”

“I have too much to say, you’ll want to sit down.”

My brother tries to turn her down without a moment’s delay. Of course he would. There’s no way he’d want to listen if it’s going to take a while, especially when it’s about a dead person he doesn’t even know. We’ve been rude to her, but she’s still willing to talk to us… Maybe she actually wants someone she can talk to about this. Besides, that kusudama clearly hasn’t been touched in a long time. She probably hasn’t been visited by any young kids in a while. When I was little, I always wanted to touch the pretty, intricate kusudama, but I always broke them right away. My grandma would fold them little by little over the year, then give it to me on tanabata. Sakuma-san’s kusudama is more intricate than the ones my grandma used to make. It’s beautiful, but for some reason it makes me feel lonely.

Before my brother can make a decision, Sakurako-san heads into the apartment. I follow right after her. My brother reluctantly follows after me. Sakuma-san leads us to the living room. There are lots of potted plants on the veranda. Isozaki-sensei would be excited to see how big and amazing her clivia is.

“It was a gift, but go ahead and eat up.”

“Oh, these are bekomochi! Those are nii-san’s favourite.”

Sakuma-san sets bekomochi and daifuku down on the table. My brother loves bekomochi. He doesn’t usually like sweets, but bekomochi and our Nagayama grandma’s ohagi are the exceptions.

“It’s been a while… You can’t get these in Tokyo.”

“Yeah, it’s only in Hokkaido and Touhoku that we call cows ‘beko.”

Bekomochi is mochi made with high quality rice flour that gets kneaded in brown sugar after it’s steamed. They’re shaped like leaves. There’s a theory that they’re called bekomochi because

they're the colour of a cow. Some people think they're named after rice flour (beiko). They're usually made for festivals in May, but they're eaten all year round. The flavour hasn't changed in a long time.

"The shinkomochi is good, too, so go ahead and try some. Even if there's some left over, I won't be able to finish it all," Sakuma-san says while brewing some tea.

I want to help carry it over at the very least, but she just says "it's fine, you can just sit and eat." I take her up on her kind offer, and reach for a delicious, brown and white bekomochi. The mochi is nice and plump. As I bite into the brown sugar portion, it gives a satisfying resistance.

"There's walnuts inside… It's delicious."

My brother isn't even just flattering her, it's genuinely really good mochi. Sakurako-san grins while reaching for an irresistible mugwort shinko mochi. I quickly finish off my bekomochi so I can grab one of the shinko mochi. The sweet red bean paste inside the soft, mugwort mochi makes a strong statement. It's a staggeringly good balance. Absolutely incredibly tasty.

"I'm so glad. I can't eat all this alone. I keep my freezer full for times like these."

Sakuma-san tells us about how she feels terrible needing to throw out such delicious food. No, food should never be wasted. Sakurako-san ends up devouring another of each type of mochi. She won't be able to eat dinner, I've seen it happen before. I silently apologize to gran as I reach for my third shinko mochi. I glare at my brother. He doesn't eat a lot of sweets, so he's satisfied after just one bekomochi.

"Take the leftovers with you," Sakuma-san says, laughing as she watches us.

"…Eimi-chan really loved the mame daifuku from this shop…"

Sakuma-san murmurs while drinking her tea. She's sitting at the dining table, rather than on one of the two sofas the rest of us are using.

"I'm really glad you came. Not just because of the mochi; I've been wanting someone to talk to."

Sakuma-san gazes at nothing in particular with both her hands wrapped around her tea cup. She looks like she's remembering something.

"About what?" Sakurako-san asks after clearing her throat.

"I'm not young anymore, but it was never something I could talk about **...** This feels wrong, but… Now's the time. I always thought I'd take it with me to my grave, but I've finally decided…"

"So, what do you know?" Sakurako-san asks sharply, clearly starting to get irritated.

Sakuma-san lowers her head, and gently sets down her cup.

"Her parents… they disappeared."

"They… disappeared?"

"Yes. It was quite sudden. They used to live in the room Eimi-chan lived in. Eimi-chan moved out after high school, but one day when she visited… The two of them were just gone."

"Could they have… moved out, or something?"

It doesn't really feel like "disappeared" is the right word. However, Sakuma-san shakes her head.

"Is there a missing person report, or anything…" Sakuma-san shakes her head again.

"Then what happened?"

"When Hiroshi-san, her father, got drunk he was… quite violent toward Eimi-chan and Tomoko-san."

Sakuma-san has a hard time getting the words out, as if just saying it will curse her.

"In other words… domestic violence, huh."

She bites her lips, and despite trying to be reserved about the severity, nods several times.

"Eimi-chan was a good student, but she left home to work right after high school, rather than go to university, because of her father. Tomoko-san insisted that he was a good person when he was sober… She refused to divorce him because he'd have a hard time living alone."

I can't fathom why someone would worry about the person who abuses them. I remember Sakurako-san saying something before about how suffering through abuse atrophies the brain, so it's harder

to make rational decisions. It reminds me of the Heisei era Lizzie Borden incident.

"But… One day, I just stopped seeing them."

Sakurako-san raises one eyebrow.

"I thought it was strange… Eimi-chan started living in that apartment after that, so one day I asked her about what happened. She said her mother left, and told her father she wasn't coming back, so he found a new girlfriend."

I wonder why Tomoko-san would leave so suddenly, when she was worried about her husband? Maybe she left because he already had another girl… It still doesn't feel right, but I guess it's plausible.

"She asked me not to file a missing persons report. She said that she didn't want to bother her mother, now that she was finally free. She didn't want anything to lead back to her mother if her father came back… Since she asked, I didn't tell anyone."

Sakuma-san gently strokes her teacup with her fingertips and lets out a heavy sigh.

"…But Tomoko-san said she didn't have anyone she could rely on since she eloped when she got married… It'd be nice if she was truly free, but…"

"You don't think she is?"

Sakuma-san shakes her head at Sakurako-san's question.

"I don't know. I think it's possible that Hiroshi-san, Eimi-chan's father, did something, but then I don't think Eimi-chan would protect him… I wanted to protect Tomoko-san, too. If she was in trouble, then…"

Even after telling us all that, she keeps saying "but…" and trying to go back on her words.

"But… in the end, Eimi-chan passed away two years later… I regret not going to the police right away."

Sakuma-san covers her face with both hands, taking deep breaths to try to hold back her tears while her muffled voice says, "it's my fault Eimi-chan died."

"What exactly do you think the cause was?"

"I don't know, but… I don't think it was suicide. It's possible her father tampered with the brakes on her car."

“I don’t think so,” my brother speaks for the first time.

“What… makes you say that? After all…”

“Well… Regardless of her father’s motive, you can’t just mess with the brakes in a car.”

Sakuma-san gives me a perplexed look after my brother’s blunt assertion.

“Umm… Why can’t you?” It can’t be helped, so I ask for an explanation in her place.

My brother takes a sip of his tea, then leans forward slightly.

“Cars don’t have just one brake system. If one of the brakes isn’t working, another can compensate for it. It’d be dangerous otherwise, right? Cars are designed to stop safely if they’re damaged,” he says, and grabs a nearby paper and pen to draw a rough car shape. “Well… I can’t speak for all cars, but domestically produced ones that are currently running should have three brake systems. I can’t imagine all of them failing at the same time.”

He adds the foot brake, engine brake, and emergency brake to his picture.

“The engine brake can’t be tampered with, and there would be no point in messing with the emergency brake, so it would probably be the foot brake… But even then, it’s not like you’d suddenly drive into a lake or something. If the brake hose was cut, the brakes wouldn’t work from the start. If the disk rotors had been oiled, she would have crashed as soon as the car started. If the Servo unit was tampered with, something would feel wrong as soon as the engine started. Well… I guess a particularly dense person might not notice, but the car wouldn’t run for long like that.”

My brother takes a deep breath after his rapid-fire explanation. Sakuma-san is staring at him with a blank expression. Sakurako-san looks a bit surprised, too.

“Umm… My brother is attending a technical school in Tokyo,” I explain.

Sakurako-san and Sakuma-san look like they’re convinced now.

“I want to be an automotive engineer. I actually want to develop bikes, rather than cars, but… Anyway, the tampered brakes theory is

unrealistic. It's not impossible, but it would require a lot of technical knowledge, luck, and good timing. It's nearly impossible to make the brakes only fail when she's about to drive into a lake, though."

My brother draws an X across his page.

"So the problem wouldn't be the car, but the person driving it. That is, if it was even an accident to begin with."

I look at Sakurako-san. Maybe it's because of my brother that I've always liked her vast knowledge of, and obsession with, bones. I remember back when I was in middle school, my brother looked dazzling when he told me he was moving to Tokyo because he wanted to learn more. Back then, I didn't have anything I actually wanted to do. Will I ever find something I can be as passionate about as my brother and Sakurako-san are?

"I don't think anyone would go so far as to use her car to fake her suicide. There has to be a simpler method with a higher chance of success."

Sakurako-san seems to accept my brother's explanation. I don't think Sakurako-san knows too much about cars, so his well organized explanation must have helped. For some reason, I feel like she sees him a little differently now. When presented with all the information, we'll have to give up on Sakuma-san's "killed by tampering with the brakes" theory. She seems very reluctant, though.

"But… It was a suicide? But why…" Sakuma-san murmurs with a lonely expression.

"It could have been an accident. Sometimes humans make mistakes that surprise even the person themself. It could have been something like that."

Sakuma-san quietly nods at my attempt to comfort her. I wonder if it's true. People prefer having someone to hold a grudge against over having someone to understand how they feel.

"How long after the parents disappeared did the daughter die?"

"Let's see… I don't quite remember, but… Around one or two years later?"

Sakuma-san replies in a frail, exhausted voice as Sakurako-san mercilessly digs through her memories.

“A year or two, huh… Well, either way, you’re an outsider. You don’t have to feel responsible for anything that happened to the people involved. The Yoshimine family didn’t want you to intervene.”

“I know that! But still… I can’t help but feel like I could have done something!” Sakuma-san argues back, finally losing her patience with Sakurako-san.

The regret she’s carried for so long overflows.

“…She was such a lovely woman, it’s only natural to feel sorrow after what happened. May I ask you a little more about Eimi-san herself?”

I decide to steer the conversation in another direction. I’d rather have her talk about her happy memories than her regret.

“Let’s see, she was a kind girl… Really, such a gentle person,” Sakuma-san says in a hoarse voice after wiping away her tears with the handkerchief that was in her pocket. “She did very well in class, despite not going to cram school. Ever since she was little, she— Oh! I have a photo. It’s from when she was young. She forgot it here when she visited once… I still have it around somewhere,” she says. She takes a photograph out of a drawer in the adjacent altar room.

It’s very old, and the colours are faded. I wonder how many times she’s held it for it to be so worn. In the sepia-tone picture is a woman wearing a dress and boots, as well as a young girl wearing a polka dotted bathing suit. They’re both smiling happily at the camera. Between the girl and woman is a bucket… They seem to be by the sea, probably on a tidal flat. Sakuma-san and everyone at the museum described Eimi-san as being an “intelligent person.” I’m startled by how strong the look in the eyes of the girl in the photo is. They were right, she gives the impression that she was a really smart woman.

“This picture is from when her family went digging for Manila clams in Lake Notoro. I wonder if Hiroshi-san was too drunk to join them… After he hurt his back, he kept taking time off work, and he kept drinking more and more each day…”

Not long afterwards, he started abusing his wife and daughter. Sakuma-san just watched from afar. Sakuma-san tried to secretly call the police once, but it only caused the father to blame Tomoko-

san. She can think of all kinds of things she could have done to help now, but at the time she felt hopeless. I almost feel like crying.

"Thinking about it now won't change what happened. It's pointless," Sakurako-san says heartlessly.

"I just can't help it… Especially since a young couple moved into that room last year… I feel crushed by regret every time I hear their child playing happily. I should have done something to help Eimi-chan…"

"She didn't ask you to help."

"…What?"

"Am I wrong? Did Eimi Yoshimine or her mother ask you to help?"

"No, but…"

"Then you have nothing to do with it. It's not your responsibility."

"It is so! I knew about the abuse!" Sakuma-san raises her voice in protest. She sobs into her handkerchief.

"No, you're an outsider. Do you think you're the only one who knew? Her school and her mother's work would have noticed something was wrong. The people who lived beside and below her probably noticed, too."

Even just listening to the story, I can't help but think that she could have done more, so I can't imagine how much regret she feels. But what could she have really done? Sakuma-san couldn't put herself in danger. After she reported it the first time, things only got worse, so she ended up being more cautious the next time. If she tried to help again, the abuse would have escalated again.

"…But if I'd helped her, Eimi-chan could have lived a different life. She could have studied properly, gotten a good job, got married-"

"That's only in hindsight. Even if her life had gone differently, it might not have been the happy future you're imagining. You don't even know if that's what she wanted in the first place," Sakurako-san's words are detached.

She has a point, though. It's all in the past now. Sakurako-san lets out a long sigh.

“Is the child living in her old apartment really happy? Isn’t it possible that they’re being abused, too?” Sakurako-san asks, looking over at the door.

“No… That child is well cared for. They’re a cheerful, kind family.”

“Then that child isn’t a current version of Eimi Yoshimine. You never know what kind of evil is lurking outside the house, though. You should watch over them carefully. No matter how peaceful the town may be, if there’s more than one person around, an incident could occur,” Sakurako-san says gently.

Sakuma-san nods, her face stained with tears. Watching out for that child will make her happier than trying to change the past.

So, we leave Sakuma-san’s house. She gives us the leftover mochi and some cans of coffee to have in the car. Before we leave, I beg her for the kusudama.

“It’s beautiful. My grandma used to make one every year.”

“Up until a few years ago, I’d make them every day as a brain training exercise. Maybe… Maybe I’ll start doing that again.”

“Please send me a picture of your next masterpiece.”

I exchange email addresses with her.

“Eimi-chan loved them, too. We often used to make them together. But.. She always used to apologize, rather than saying ‘thank you.’”

Sakuma-san lets out a lonely sigh as she sees us off.

“I wonder if… I was really nothing more than an ‘outsider’ to her…”

“Even if you were, I know you still made a difference to her. Do you have a family?”

My brother is surprised by how straightforward Sakurako-san is. Sakuma-san can’t help but let a laugh slip out from how unexpected it was, but her smile doesn’t look happy.

“I had a son with my ex-husband… But I haven’t seen him in around 40 years for various reasons. I’m sure he must hate me.”

“Then you should ask for forgiveness. If they’re still alive, at least.”

“What?!”

Perhaps she's gotten used to the way Sakurako-san speaks and acts, because Sakuma-san replies in a clear, yet self-deprecating, voice. Sakurako-san puts her shoes on, then taps her toe against the floor as she says,

"Wouldn't it be more constructive to reconnect with them? Rather than daydream about someone who's already dead?"

Sakuma-san has a stiff, bewildered expression. It's true that it isn't easy to get back into a family member's life after you've been out of touch for a long time. But still—

"No matter what you think or say, the girl in that photo isn't going to reply to you. You aren't immortal. Neither is your son. There's no point in wallowing in regret. Humans have the capacity to learn."

"Yes, I'll think about it… Thank you," Sakuma-san says with a bitter smile.

I don't know how much Sakurako-san's words resonated with her.

"No," Sakurako-san says. "As soon as this door closes behind us, you have to contact them. You're in an emotional state after meeting with us. You're not in your usual mentality. It's best if you ride the emotional high and contact them now."

Sakurako-san holds her fist by her ear like it's a phone, and gives Sakuma-san a mischievous wink. I don't know what Sakuma-san did after we left. I hope she becomes happier than before, though. She's such a kind, lonely person.

Part 5

As soon as we get back to the car, my brother rests his head against the steering wheel without doing up his seatbelt. Meeting and talking with people you don't know is unexpectedly exhausting. Even more so when you're faced with that person's sadness, anger, and regret. In contrast to Sakurako-san, who is sitting in the back seat with her legs crossed and thinking about something, the two of us in the front seats are completely worn out.

“Well, let’s go back. After all… Those bones have nothing to do with Eimi Yoshimine, right?”

My brother slaps his cheeks to work up some energy, and does up his seat belt.

“We don’t know that for sure. But both of her parents disappeared unnaturally, huh.”

“So then… The bones in the museum might be her parents,” I mutter with my cheek pressed against the window.

The woman’s skull we found had evidence of domestic abuse. Pictures of that poor skull are recorded on my phone. I feel my cold, inorganic phone with my fingertips in the pocket of my cargo pants.

“So that’d mean the one who was strangled was her father?”

“I can’t say for sure if it’s the father, but the features on the skull indicated that it was likely male. Assuming that the corpses are from the Yoshimine couple… The mother may have killed the father because she couldn’t take it anymore, or she killed him to protect her daughter.”

I make myself nauseated imagining her witnessing the death of her daughter, then strangling her husband out of rage.

That child with beautiful eyes, and her lovely, kind mother… Although it can’t be determined if there was a delay between when the two people died with the naked eye, Sakurako-san said that at the very least, they didn’t seem to have died on the scale of years apart.

“Given that the mother’s skull is also at the museum, she either committed suicide, or lost her life some other way. Then Eimi Yoshimine dealt with the bodies herself, rather than reporting it to the police.”

My brother was about to get out of the car, but suddenly stops in his tracks.

“She dealt with her parents’ bodies herself…?”

“There would have been no other options. She couldn’t leave the bodies just sitting there… Who else would have helped?”

“But… How could she do that…?”

“Simply because she couldn’t let anyone else find out. Depending on the time of year, the corpses would start to

decompose quickly. She had to do something fast, otherwise someone would notice. Well, in that case we can assume Eimi Yoshimine was involved in the murder of her parents."

"No matter what happened, I would never want my mom to murder someone," I say.

Even if it was indirectly, or if she was trying to protect her family.

"Exactly… No matter how many reasons someone had, there's no way they could dispose of their parents' corpses." My brother's voice sounds shocked.

I understand how he feels, but… I also know that people can be surprisingly cold and calculating when something is important.

"Maybe she wanted to see her parents' bones," Sakurako-san says, just to disgust my brother even more.

"Wh… What?"

"One of her former coworkers said she loved bones. Even if they were her parents, it's not like they could hate her for it if they were already dead."

"But… Well, it's true that the dead can't speak, but…"

"It's possible that she wanted to find out why they died. When my pet cat died, I investigated the cause of death myself."

My brother glances back at Sakurako-san through the rear view mirror, completely dumbfounded.

"Though Atsushi has a point. It would be difficult for one person to dismantle two adult corpses on her own without raising suspicion. It's a big undertaking."

"No, that's not what I meant-" My brother tries to say that he meant it from an emotional point of view.

But sentimentality means nothing to Sakurako-san. Maybe Yoshimine-san felt that way, too.

"Either way, would one woman really be able to do all that alone? She must have had to dump the bodies in separate pieces, since it's unlikely she could carry a whole corpse at once."

A lot of corpses in Japan are cut into pieces before they're abandoned. It might seem like it's to hide the victim's identity, but it's

usually just because it's easier to transport. Heisei Lizzie Borden also chopped up her mother in law for the same reason.

"Then the answer is simple. She wasn't working alone," Sakurako-san says with a rising whistle.

It's like she's trying to say that this is getting interesting.

"The one thing that's bothering me is that the skulls were likely buried underground. Based on my experience, the bones didn't seem to have been simmered or soaked. Even if they're chopped up, it's not easy for a single person to dig a grave big enough for two," Sakurako-san says, and holds her tented fingers by her lips while she thinks. "It's Occam's Razor. 'Entities should not be multiplied beyond necessity.' In other words, it's better to think about things in their simplest form. If one of you killed your parents alone, what would you do? And don't say that you'd turn yourself in."

My brother looks at me again with a face like he's wondering why he would ever do that. Although, my brother and I would have a line of thinking more in line with the general population than Sakurako-san would.

"Well… If you had a car and an accomplice, I don't think it'd be that hard to get rid of the body. There's lots of good places in Hokkaido to leave a corpse if you were so inclined. Familiarity with the area would help, I think."

"Then where would you dump a corpse in Asahikawa? Assuming you had the corpses of two of your family members, where would you ditch them?"

My brother responds to her question bitterly, "…Asahidake."

"Why? There's plenty of other mountains."

"Because… It's just a place I know well. I used to climb up it with my dad and grandpa a lot when Taro was a baby."

"So it's a place you have memories and emotional attachment to."

"Well, if it was a total stranger, a spot where the corpse won't be found would be top priority, but… If the corpse is someone you were close to, I think that would factor into their judgment."

"That's true… If I had to bury someone I love, I'd pick a special spot…" I add to my brother's honest response.

“I see,” Sakurako-san says, and leans forward to manipulate the car navigation system.

“…I thought we were going back?” My brother groans.

“One more place won’t kill you, though.”

“Creating a new destination,” the lady in the navigator says in her cheerful voice.

“There’s still many things we don’t know about Eimi Yoshimine, but thankfully, we know one place where she has important memories.”

Sakurako-san grins as she plops back in her seat and does up her seatbelt.

“Her neighbour mentioned that she used to dig for Manila clams, right? Atsushi, we’re heading for Lake Notoro.”

Part 6

My brother hasn’t uttered a single word since we started heading for the lake. I think he’s mad. He always used to lock himself in his room when he was mad. He’s probably only driving us because it’s a tourist spot. It might just be because he’s too exhausted to fight anymore. Maybe it’s even because he knows it’s important to me.

The lake is famous for its Sango grassland. There was a time when it seemed like it was going to dry up and disappear, but it’s made a comeback. In the fall, the whole marsh is dyed completely red. It might be a little too late in the season for it, but I want to take a look if we have time around lunchtime. So far, this trip hasn’t been what my brother wanted at all, and he hasn’t seemed to enjoy it one bit. I’m really grateful that he’s taken us here, though.

I’m still curious about why he’s doing all of this, though. Is it just because we’re brothers? Do we get along well enough for that? Did he just feel like doing something nice for me? Well, even if it’s a bit uncomfortable, I still want to go to Lake Notoro. But if Sakurako-san is right, there might be human remains buried there. Even worse, there were signs of strangulation on one of the bodies, and the mother was being beaten every day… Then they both disappeared

one day. Besides that, the only person with any answers is already dead. We don't even know if it was suicide or an accident… There must be something more going on here. But it's hard to dig up the past. And there's also the possibility that we'll stir things up and upset the people who we ask questions to. Knowing the truth isn't always a good thing. Some answers should stay hidden away, like bone under flesh. How far should we go? At what point should we stop digging, and leave it be? I personally think what we're doing is already pushing it. But I just can't stop. I can't blame Sakurako-san for this. I want to know the truth, too.

The sun is setting, dyeing the sky pink. The country road seems like it keeps going forever. Eventually, after driving down road 76 for a while, we finally see Notoro Lakeside Park. It's a big, lakeside park with cottages for camping, and a golf course. There's athletic equipment for kids to play on, too. By the time we park and get out of the car, the sky is already completely red from the sunset.

Lake Notoro used to be a brackish lake that connected to the ocean, but now there's a levee, making it a lagoon. The water doesn't smell like a lake or the ocean, but something unique. You can dig for clams at this time of year when the tide is low, but unfortunately, it's high tide right now. The sunset reflected off the lake, along with the deep red coral grass, makes the whole area look like it's been soaked in blood. I get goosebumps on the back of my neck. The three of us stare at the scenery in silence. Sakurako-san eventually gets bored, and walks towards the reception area with shower rooms. As I chase after her, I hear her mumble, "it looks nice here."

"Yeah, the sunset is really pretty."

It's rare for her to admire the scenery… Is what I thought, but she's glaring at me suspiciously.

"No, that's not what I meant. I meant that it's well maintained."

"Huh?"

"The facilities here are still new."

Now that she mentions it, the park and buildings are well maintained, but they don't seem new.

“Oh, but this park opened on June 1st, 2002. It’s not exactly new.”

I check when it opened on my phone. It’s older than I expected. I think the cottages at the campsite were built more recently, though. Sakurako-san grins when she hears the result of my search.

“I see, so that’s how it is,” Sakurako-san says with a nod. “That means it was 15 years ago.

My brother finally comes over to join us with a sigh.

“15 years ago… So what?”

“You haven’t realized it yet? That’s when the neighbour said Eimi Yoshimine died.”

“…Oh…”

She died around 15 years ago… No, it was longer. It was before the campground was built.

Sakuma-san’s words spring to mind.

“This is just a guess, but I think Eimi Yoshimine abandoned the corpses somewhere around Lake Notoro, probably by burying them. It’s deserted here at night. When she heard about the new development, she panicked and dug up the bodies before the construction work did. If she dug them up just before she committed suicide, two years would have passed. If they were buried in regular soil, they’d just barely be skeletonized. Since the soil here has a high salt content from the sea water, they’d skeletonize a little bit faster. How does that sound?” Sakurako-san asks my brother.

“What are you talking about?”

“How she dealt with her parents’ corpses. It’s a reasonable guess, isn't it? Since boiling a skull produces such a strong smell, it would only make sense to have the ground take care of it instead.”

“…”

My brother ignores the question, and goes to buy water from the vending machine. I want one, too, but when I reach out, my brother pressed the water bottle against my forehead. I guess he’s telling me to stay coolheaded.

“Still, it’s incomprehensible.”

“Haven’t we found out enough?”

My brother bought Sakurako-san a water bottle, too, but basically throws it at her while handing it over.

“No. We still don’t know anything. The bones still don’t connect. Why did Eimi Yoshimine dig up her parents, but then only put their skulls on display at the museum… It’s incomprehensible. I just can’t understand! Why?!”

Sakurako-san quickly gulps down the water, then lets out an exasperated sigh.

“Well… For now, let’s go back to the car. We can go back to the hotel for today, and take our time thinking it over, okay?”

I don’t want to ruin my brother’s mood anymore, and I’m starting to feel tired from moving around so much. If I’m feeling worn out, my brother must be even more exhausted from driving all day. I feel bad for Sakurako-san, but my brother needs a break.

“Come on, let’s go.”

“No. I want to think it over here for a bit longer.”

“The sun has already set, though. It’ll get colder at night… See? Your hands are getting cold.”

I grab her hand to lead her back to the car, but she throws a tantrum like a child. If I let Sakurako-san catch a cold, gran will scold me. I desperately try to reason with her to coax her back to the car. Fortunately, she eventually gives in and reluctantly climbs into the back seat. My brother slowly starts to drive off.

I’d love to go on a nice, slow drive down this lakeside road toward the cape, if it wasn’t so dark out. It’d be fun to look at the scenery under the big, blue sky. But we’re headed in the opposite direction from the cape. Toward the darkness.

Part 7

I start to feel sleepy by the time we start heading back to the hotel. Sakurako-san looks angry. My brother glances back at her in the rear view mirror and sighs.

“…What is it?”

“Nothing, I just don’t know why you’re in such a bad mood.”

“I already said, it’s because the bones aren’t connecting. Besides, you’re in a bad mood, too. Why are you so angry all the time?” Sakurako-san says with her arms crossed.

My brother glares at her through her mirror.

“Did you only come so you could drag my brother around?”

“This always happens. Whenever I’m with this kid, we always find a corpse.”

I’m not feeling drowsy at all anymore.

“That’s ridiculous…!”

Sakurako-san snorts and turns away. My brother glances at me, like he’s trying to ask if that’s true. It’s… True. Sakurako-san and I always seem to stumble upon a dead body when we’re together.

“…”

My brother stays silent for a while after I explain that to him. This is business as usual for us. I feel like I have a lot to apologize to him for.

“…Well, for better or for worse, we discovered those skulls, and I’m more interested in investigating this case than anything else. This trip with you two is only my second priority now. I simply can’t understand why that woman would put her parents’ skulls on display in the museum. I have to find out,” Sakurako-san says with an exaggerated sigh.

For a while we watch as the sun gradually sinks below the horizon, its yellow-green rays stretching past the trees, and listen to the low rumble of cars driving by, as well as the soft murmur of the radio. Soon, Sakurako-san lets out another sigh. My brother heaves a big sigh, as well.

“…You really don’t know?”

“What?”

“The reason the skulls were displayed. I don’t know about all the complicated stuff, but… For now you just want to know the reason they were in the exhibit, right?” My brother says, sounding a bit excited somehow. Sakurako-san leans forward as far as the seatbelt lets her.

“What is it?! Tell me, quickly!”

My brother looks a little happy while looking at how annoyed Sakurako-san is through the rear view mirror.

“You seem like you know everything else, but you don’t understand something so simple.”

My brother stops the car in a nearby parking lot, then turns around to face the back seat.

“Even on my own body there’s areas I can’t see, like the back of my head. I don’t care if you’re going to be rude about it, just hurry up and tell me,” Sakurako-san begs my brother for the answer.

He sits back in the driver’s seat properly, and takes a deep breath.

“It’s probably… Because she loved them, isn’t it?”

“What?”

“She loved her mother. She may have felt the same way about her father, too. We were told he was a good father when he wasn’t drinking, right? Perhaps she liked her father when he wasn’t drunk.”

“…What do you mean?”

“When alcohol wasn’t involved, her parents loved each other. She was in a violent situation, so she probably wasn’t thinking clearly… The daughter probably thought that if he stopped drinking, the father that she loved would come back.”

Sakurako-san doesn’t seem to grasp what my brother is saying. Somehow, I know what he’s getting at, though.

“Romeo and Juliet from 300 years ago…” I murmur. My brother nods.

“As you said, once this Yoshimine person dug up the corpses, she had to figure out what to do with them. Since they’re the bones of her parents, she would have wanted to mourn them in some way. That’s why, at the very least, she wanted them to imitate those people who chose love in the face of death… So she took the risk.”

She wanted them to be together, even after they died. Even if the people around her thought what she did was unforgivable, Yoshimine-san wanted her parents’ bones to be together forever. She buried their bodies by the lake, then dug them up later so they wouldn’t be discovered by the construction crew. Then, all she had to do was replace the skulls from the replica she was making.

“Even if she was found out, she was already gone… Maybe she actually wanted someone to notice what she’d done to her parents.”

Sakurako-san listens with a complicated expression, unable to accept what we’re telling her.

“Why do it in such a roundabout way? If she was going to commit suicide anyway, why not take their remains with her? At least then they could be mourned together.”

“Human love isn’t that logical. It’s a lot of things all mixed together, like a mudflat. She hated her dad, but also loved him. I’m sure her mom did, too. She put them in the display so they could be remembered for their love. And also… I think she was struggling with her conflicted feelings about whether she should confess to what she did or not.”

I should turn myself in. But I can’t. I’m scared. I can’t keep living like this. I can understand the guilt and fear she must have felt. Because I’m human.

“…Also, I think she wanted to convince herself that if her parents loved each other, there’s no way they wouldn’t love their daughter. She wanted to hold on to that image of a perfect, happy family.”

Sakurako-san looks like she still can’t understand my brother’s reasoning.

“Isn’t that just your imagination running wild? Why do you think Eimi Yoshimine wanted her parents’ love in the first place?”

“I don’t think there’s a single person who doesn’t want their parents to love them,” my brother says, like it’s obvious.

Sakurako-san and him are both looking at each other with the same frown.

“Your reasoning is rooted in emotion, it’s not logical.”

“Emotions don’t have to be logical, people aren’t robots. I’m guessing you were good at science and math in school, but you weren’t good at Japanese, right?”

“That’s not true. All you have to do is work out what the teachers expect you to answer. I didn’t expect an engineering major to put emotions first.”

“That’s because the people who will use the machines I work on have a heart- unlike you.”

“Nii-san, you’re being rude!”

I can’t stand listening to my brother speak in such a cold, malicious tone anymore. Sakurako-san is not “heartless.” She’s just a bit different.

“…Whatever. Let’s just let the police investigate it. There’s no need for us to play detective. Honestly, the fact that my little brother is doing stuff like this on a regular basis makes me wonder if he should stop hanging around with you.”

Just as I’m about to object, my brother gives me a glance that’s clearly telling me to shut up.

“A year ago, my little brother would never have said he wanted to be a forensic pathologist - not that little kid that was shaking after passing by a car accident.”

I know exactly what he’s talking about. I still remember that pale hand. Now, I don’t avert my eyes from corpses, even in much worse condition.

“He’s accustomed to death. Especially corpses. At first, he would tremble with fear, but after so many times—“

It’s just as Sakurako-san says. My brother hasn’t come face to face with a dead body before. My brother angrily slams on the steering wheel, interrupting both my thoughts, and Sakurako-san’s words.

“Ordinary high school students don’t see dead bodies enough to get used to them!”

“Those that live must die. It’s the next stage of life for any organism. Why loathe it?”

“He isn’t ready for it! Even if he’s grown physically, he isn’t mentally ready. He’s still so fragile! How many times have you seen a corpse, and been touched by heaps of human cruelty and ugliness, to think that it’s just ‘the same as always’?!” His shouting feels like it’s pounding on my head.

Have I… Changed that much?

“You’ve taken over the small, fragile boy my mother and I have raised and instilled morals on, and forcibly overwhelmed him with

twisted ideas about ‘death’ and ‘corpses.’”

My brother is furious. It’s true that most ordinary people rarely happen to come across a corpse in their daily life. It’s not like I find them because I want to, though. But… If I hadn’t met Sakurako-san, I would never have discovered so many bodies. And if it weren’t for her teaching me about the human body, I’d never have gotten an interest in forensic pathology. But that’s all in hindsight. I have seen many corpses. Now I’m finding my own values. I finally know what my brother and Sakurako-san have that I don’t. Ambiguously swaying between good and evil; white, black, and grey… My sense of justice is still wavering.

“You’re just messing around with his future! What does your fiancé think of you-“

“That’s enough! Just shut up!” I shout. I’m on my last nerve.

“…Did Naoe say something?” Sakurako-san asks in a troubled tone.

“Nothing. Ariwara-san has nothing to do with this. Nii-san is just misunderstanding.” I quickly respond before turning back to my brother.

He doesn’t understand anything.

“You don’t know anything! She’s not deceiving me, and she’s not messing around with me! It’s true that my moral values are different from before, but that just means I’ve grown as a person!”

“Shoutarou…”

“I haven’t even seen you in a year, then you suddenly show up and act like you know what’s best for me,” I say, then turn away from him.

I can see through the reflection on the glass that he’s surprised… And maybe… Hurt, too. I know that he’s worried about me because he cares, but he didn’t have to go that far. I’m allowed to live my life however I want. I have people I cherish, too. He can’t just barge in and try to change whatever he wants.

“…”

My brother stays silent for a while. Eventually, he turns the car back on. The song playing on the radio is too cheerful, so I turn it off. I’d rather listen to Diavel. His screaming would fit better.

“I’m not very good at writing book reports.”

Sakurako-san suddenly says while she watches the scenery fly by.

“I’ll confess. I always took the work home and had Ms. Shouko help me.” Sakurako-san huffs defiantly.

My brother stays silent for a moment, then bursts out laughing.

“Isn’t that just cheating?”

“Probably, but that statute of limitations is up. Things like ‘write about what you think. Not a synopsis, but your favourite scene’ was too hard for me because… I didn’t have any thoughts about it… In other words, you were right. I can’t write book reports, and I can’t guide the boy the way you did… I wanted to apologize for that.”

“…That wasn’t even an apology.”

I thought Sakurako-san’s words were quite earnest. My brother seems perplexed, though.

“I see… In that case, let’s go see live whales tomorrow. Today was really fun, so… tomorrow is your turn,” Sakurako-san says with a smile.

My brother nods with a strained smile. How much longer will this bitter taste in my mouth persist?

Part 8

I peer through the window of the hotel room at the beautiful, starry sky. But between my brother and I, it’s overcast and tempestuous. It doesn’t feel like we’re on speaking terms. I’m grateful that my brother is so genuinely concerned about me being accustomed to seeing corpses, but a broken egg can’t be put back together. I can’t go back to being that trembling child for the rest of my life.

My brother is laying on the couch, exhausted, so I decide to make some coffee. Kouji-san always puts a manual coffee grinder in

the rooms he prepares. Once I open the vacuum sealed packs for each cup, the rich, slightly sweet aroma of the beans fills my nose.

"It smells good," I mutter without thinking. My brother looks at me.

"What?"

"What… That's what I should be asking. What's your problem?"

"Me?"

I put the beans into the grinder and feel the crunchy sensation as I turn the handle. My brother looks at me with a strange, scary expression.

"…So? What's your problem?"

"I just feel like you've changed."

"Of course I have. I'm in high school now."

I used to only drink Yukijirushi Megmilk coffee, but now I can drink regular coffee just fine without sugar, as long as I add milk.

"I wasn't talking about your age… Do you really feel like you belong in an extravagant room like this? Who are you now? Are you still Shoutarou Tatewaki?"

"What?"

"It's only been a year since I last saw you, but you're a completely different person now."

"…"

My brother covers his mouth, like he feels nauseated. He seems so far away now. Just as he said, extravagant things like this hotel don't suit "Shoutarou Tatewaki." But I'm also "Soutarou Kujou." That's why I'm allowed to stay in this room. I'm a replacement for Soutarou-kun. I bet Kouji-san thinks so, too. And Shouko-san. I'm sure Ariwara-san and gran do, too. Ah, but still…. It's frustrating and depressing to know that they only ever see the ghost behind me. Now that my brother brought it up, I feel uneasy about using Soutarou-kun's position.

"I… I'm me. Both in the past, and now."

My voice is hoarse. I don't want to be Soutarou-kun. But what am I supposed to do about it?

"People can grow a lot in just one year. I haven't changed. Having Sakurako-san around just triggered that growth that would

have happened anyway. From now on… A lot of different people are going to help me grow. I already have my own world."

It's not just corpses that I've come across. I've seen how cruel the world can be, sad people, unfortunate people, and people who have completely overturned my moral values. All these people still live on deep in my heart. Like a curse. But my brother has a point. Shoutarou Tatewaki has no business being in this room.

I take a dip in the public bath, then ask Shouko-san to let me change rooms. I switch rooms with an old man that I met in the bath who said, "we live off our pensions, so the only thing my wife and I get to do as a couple is go on a trip once a year." It won't make things better between Sakurako-san and my brother, but at least it's something…

Anyway, the food at the smorgasbord they have looks good. My brother smiled when I told him about my plan to switch rooms. The Tatewaki family consists of a long line of big eaters. The old man and woman are pleased about it, too. It feels like this is the way things should be. It may not be served to us by waitstaff, but the food at Kouji-san's hotel is delicious!

"There's meat!"

"There's sashimi!"

While I get my freshly grilled steak, my brother ecstatically loads up his plate with fresh caught sashimi. My brother starts off by going after all the Japanese foods, mainly seafood. I'm starting off with my steak, raclette covered in rich cheese, and other western foods. Well, we'll both end up eating some of everything, anyway.

"…Hokkaido really does have amazing fish, huh?" My brother says happily as he digs into the plump, firm sashimi.

"Is it really that different? I thought it would be pretty much the same anywhere near the sea."

"Well, you just get different kinds of fish. I was disappointed that the fish I used to eat were more expensive, and worse quality. Salmon and pacific saury cost twice as much over there, compared to here. It's too expensive to justify buying it."

"Ah~ I'd hate it if pacific saury was that expensive here."

I'm glad I live in a place where you can cover the dining table in saury for under 100 yen when it's cheap. After a bath and some dinner, my brother is in a much better mood. It's almost like we didn't just argue.

"Oh, but the tuna from the Tsukiji market is delicious."

"Tuna is always good."

It's nice to chat about trivial things while eating together. The only downside to a smorgasbord is that you have to get up every time you run out of food, so it interrupts the conversation. I pile a bunch of sashimi on top of some rice, then go back to my seat. This would normally be an expensive meal. My brother is just getting back with a plate full of fresh tempura and lamb steak. Before he sits down, he grabs my head with his big hands.

"Stop it! I'm trying to eat!"

I can't even count the number of times he did this to me when we were kids. I've always been jealous of how big his hands are.

"So… What are you going to do? Which university are you going to go to?"

"Huh?"

"Are you trying to get into medical school?"

Usually when he grabs my head like this, he usually tackles me to the floor. He'd always do that when I didn't do my homework over summer break, or when he was trying to get me to tell him something. It's been a long time, so I let my guard down, but I know he doesn't want a half hearted answer. I straighten my posture.

"If you're going to university in Tokyo, I think it would be better if mom came and stayed with you. Depending on where the school is located, you'll want to live somewhere with convenient public transit options. I had to think about that stuff before I moved."

"…"

I stare at him blankly. I'm at a loss for words.

"What?"

"Nothing, just… I thought you were against my career path… And I thought you came to visit so you could see what I've been up to lately, so…"

I thought my brother was completely against me going into forensic pathology or anthropology. Anything that would involve me investigating human corpses and bones.

“If I disagree, are you going to give up on it?”

“No… Mom specifically told me to make time to talk to you, though.”

“…”

So the reason he took me on this sudden trip really was to persuade me. Our mom probably asked him to talk to me because she knows I’m no match for my brother. I can’t believe he’s not only not rejecting the idea, but even thinking about me going to Tokyo. I was expecting a lecture, so I don’t really know how to react at first. But when I look into his eyes, and he looks straight back at me, I can tell he isn’t joking. He isn’t the type to trick people with jokes like that.

“Have you decided yet?”

“Oh, no, I haven’t, but…”

My brother got impatient waiting for me to reply. I take a sip of oolong tea to ground myself.

“But… I’m thinking of going to Asahikawa University.”

“Not Sapporo?”

“Yeah. I feel safer in my hometown. I can’t leave mom and the grandpas behind. There are people who I’d like to learn from in Sapporo, but the best teachers are supposedly in Asahikawa. Asahikawa is the best place in Hokkaido for anything related to DNA testing.”

“…Is that really everything?”

I’ve really thought about it thoroughly. But upon hearing my explanation, my brother frowns.

“Isn’t it because *she* is in Asahikawa?” He asks suspiciously.

I immediately know what he’s talking about, and my ears feel hot.

“Quit it with the weird assumptions. She’s an extraordinary person but… There’s no special meaning behind it!”

“Then what is it?”

“I don’t really know, but compared to when I’m with my teachers, and my friends… I learn a lot. It’s fun, and I feel like I can’t

leave her on her own, even though she sometimes annoys me, or acts so childish I can't believe she's older than me… Anyway, it's not what you think!"

Despite how long we've been together, I still can't find the right words to describe my relationship with Sakurako-san. All I know is that she's so important to me that I would put my life at risk to protect her. My brother lets out a deep sigh.

"You know… Most people just call that love."

"W-well it isn't!"

"Yes it is. You're describing love, but calling it something else. You need to admit it to yourself. Things will change in the future."

"I know myself better than you do. And what do you mean by change? The relationship between Sakurako-san and I will never change!"

I suddenly notice that the sashimi I was about to eat has been sitting in my dish of soy sauce this whole time. I don't need that much soy sauce for sashimi this good… My poor, precious sashimi… I toss it in my mouth anyway. As I expected, it's offensively salty.

"Ugh!"

I'm getting irritated. He always just says whatever he feels like. He has no idea how I feel. If I were to admit that I love Sakurako-san, I wouldn't be able to stay by her side any more.

"You know… You should just admit it to yourself. Whether you say it out loud or not, it's a fact that won't change."

"That's not true. If I kept telling myself that I love her, eventually I'd start to think it's true. They call that the power of words, right? That's why I'll never admit it."

If I let those thoughts out into the world, they might have the power to influence me.

"What do you want from me, anyway?!"

He keeps tugging me around in different directions, whether it's about my career path or Sakurako-san. Seeing how calm he is when I'm feeling so emotional that I could cry just makes me angrier.

"All I want is for you to be free."

"…What?"

“You’re always trying to take after the adults around you. I just want you to know that you don’t need to do that.”

He’s been drinking the same oolong tea as me, so I know he isn’t drunk… He flicks his glass.

“Do you really want to go into forensic science? Is it your own decision, independent of her? Did you only choose that path because you like her?”

“No, that isn’t why!” I shake my head.

That honestly, truly isn’t the reason why.

“It’s true that Sakurako-san was the reason I first took interest in the field… But I want to be a champion of justice.”

Two years ago, I thought that investigating corpses was insane, but now I’ve realized that people are people, whether they’re alive or dead. Even if someone dies, rots, and turns to bone, they’re still the same person. Everyone hopes that their loved ones will pass away peacefully of natural causes. But if they don’t, then they’ll want to know “why?” There aren’t many people who can answer that all important question. Without knowing that, it’s hard to move on. I’m sure there are other people like Kougami, who was worried she was the reason her grandma died. People who don’t know how to listen to the voices of the dead. I want to help those people hear their loved one’s final message, so they can greet tomorrow and keep living. After I explain all of that to my brother, he just silently stares at me for a while.

“When I was a kid, I thought that everything was clearly defined as good or evil, but now I know that isn’t true. However, I still want to do the right thing. I want to help people. I firmly believe that I’ll be able to find justice in forensic pathology.”

“…Dad wasn’t a hero,” my brother says.

He knows that dad is the reason I’ve always wanted to be a champion of justice.

“I know that.” I grimace.

Of course I know that, I’m not a child anymore.

“Then why do you want to be a hero?”

“Because I want to… There’s a simpler reason than that, too.”

“A simpler reason?”

“Yeah. Because it’s fun.”

“…”

My brother pushes his tray forward, and leans his elbows on the table. I feel a bit relieved that I got to pour my heart out to him.

“To be honest, I don’t really understand it myself, and I’m still a little bit scared of corpses, but… Forensic science is a mystery. You have to piece together all the clues to figure out what the dead are trying to say. Above all else, the human body is interesting. It may sound morbid, but I find the human body fascinating. The more I learn, the more fascinating I find it. Forensic science gives me a sense of purpose, and it’s something I’m really interested in studying.”

People who think it’s grotesque to perform tests and examinations on corpses are making a big mistake. Forensic pathology is medicine. The only difference is whether the patient is alive or dead. Since the patients can’t tell you about their condition, forensic scientists have to infer their words. Forensic scientists heal the trauma inflicted on those left behind, and give dignity to the dead.

“Forensic scientists face the dead because they love the living. They feel anger toward crime. That’s true for the ones I know, anyway - they’re incredibly kind, unique people. If it’s possible, I also want to become a wonderful person like that.”

I want to be like Professor Shitara, the person Sakurako-san admires. Maybe it’s because of Sakurako-san’s pretense, like my brother says, but that’s not all. I also admire Professor Shitara.

“Of course, I know you must be reluctant about the word ‘corpse,’ but-“

“Enough! I get it. If you’re that serious about it, I won’t oppose you.”

My brother crumples his face, begging me to stop talking about dead bodies while we’re eating. He’s right. I was being thoughtless. I’m already able to eat normally after seeing a corpse that day.

“I still think you should be flexible with your plans. You should think it through more before deciding not to leave Asahikawa.”

“But…”

“No buts. Mom and grandpa wouldn’t want to hold you back, anyway. But we can worry about that later. I did whatever I wanted, even though it made you angry.”

“…That’s not true.”

It’s true that I was shocked when my brother suddenly said he was going to university in Tokyo, though. My mom looked really lonely after my grandma and brother both disappeared around the same time. After seeing my mom and grandpa like that, I started thinking that I’ll definitely stay in this city.

“Even if mom and the others get lonely, or sometimes get burdened, they still want you to choose the path you truly want to pursue, Shoutarou. Going to university somewhere else isn’t casting your hometown aside. The place you were born and raised is something that won’t ever change. Besides, coming back to Asahikawa after a while makes the sky feel bigger, and my heart feel lighter. Also, eating the ikura mom makes is the best thing ever.”

“That’s true… It’s a bit too sweet, though.”

We look at each other and laugh. Salmon roe has gotten more and more expensive lately, to the point where it’s a luxury food now, but for the people of Hokkaido, Ikura is basically a rice topping we eat in fall and winter. It’s not just ikura, either. The same goes for tarako, mentaiko, sujiko, and tobikko. Whether it’s roe from a sculpin, saffron cod, or octopus, there’s a high probability that any given household in Hokkaido has some kind of fish egg in their fridge that they’ll put on top of rice without hesitation. Ikura in particular tastes like home. It’s something I’ve always eaten. It’s always delicious, but the Kujo household and Tatewaki household make ikura differently.

We resume our dinner. I wonder if a day will come when I miss Asahikawa while eating ikura that tastes different from home. Asahikawa is a comfortable place to live. It has most things, and is fairly prosperous. Anything we don’t have you can get in Sapporo or online. It’s painful when we get a book released a day or two late, though. I never really thought about leaving. But just like he said… I can always come back, so I should think about studying in a different city.

“…Did we come here just so you could say that to me?”

He lifts his gaze from his seafood.

“There’s another reason, too,” he says with an embarrassed smile.

“I thought you just wanted to lecture me, or object to my plans…”

“Well if you want a lecture, I can do that. Mom worries about you, and you don’t have a father around… What kind of older brother would I be if I wasn’t worried about your future?”

I can feel tears welling up in my eyes.

“But this trip has been absolutely awful. I’m sick of hearing about bones constantly,” he says, pushing the bones from his meal off to the side of his plate.

“We booked a whale watching tour for tomorrow morning as an apology for you.”

“You only get to see them if you’re lucky, right? If you’re there, the whales definitely won’t show up.”

“Hey!”

“Oh, are you still eating?” Someone says cheerfully.

Shouko-san and Sakurako-san came to find us, since they had already finished eating.

“It’s Shou-chan we’re talking about, he’ll probably keep eating for a while longer. Come find me in the bar lounge once you’re finished. Saa-chan doesn’t like alcohol because it’s bitter, but do you drink, Atsushi-kun?”

“Yeah, I’ll meet you over there.”

Shouko-san looks younger and more energetic today, probably because of the beauty salon and hot springs. My brother looks a bit troubled, but he doesn’t seem unhappy. Even if she’s a bit older than him, he can’t refuse an invitation from a beautiful woman.

“There’s a sunken hearth next to the bar lounge where you can roast marshmallows. Shou-chan, can you keep an eye on Saa-chan so she doesn’t eat too many?”

“Understood, I’ll be there in 10.” I answer with a salute.

I’ve been entrusted with a task of the utmost importance. But I still have more food to eat before I can head out.

“Actually, make that 20 minutes…”

“Fufufu! You can eat and talk as much as you’d like.”

After eating a hearty dinner with marshmallows for dessert, I take a dip in the open air bath under the starry sky. The next day, early in the morning, we head out to go whale watching. Shouko-san and Sakurako-san must be extremely lucky to counteract my bad luck. The captain looks delighted to see minke whales, Baird’s beaked whales, and Dall’s porpoises in rapid succession. By the final day, Sakurako-san and my brother can have normal conversations with each other, and even laugh together. The sky is a beautiful shade of blue, and the food is delicious… I’m really glad I came on this trip.

I was too busy having fun, and missed a phone call from Kougami. When I call her back and tell her I’m on a trip, she asks for a souvenir. I decide to buy her a white, glass pendant that looks like a konpeito candy from the Ryuhyo Glass Museum. It was expensive, but it got the Shouko-san seal of approval that she’ll like it and it’ll suit her, so I had no choice but to get it.

After returning home and filling our stomach’s with mom’s ikura, my brother goes back to Tokyo, and I return to my everyday life. His only regret was not getting to go to Asahiyama Zoo, so he’ll definitely have to come back in the winter. Asahiyama is cold in the winter, but the penguins and wolves are most active then, so it’s the best time to visit. And so, our little autumn trip came to a close. A feeling of loneliness remains in my chest.

Part 9

Several days after the trip, I get a call from Sakurako-san.

“Gran’s going to the hospital in Sapporo for treatment? I want to go, too, then. I have a school trip coming up, so there’s some things I want to buy.”

I’ve been invited to go to Sapporo on the weekend. I’m grateful to get to go before the field trip at the end of the month.

My mom is watching TV, and I'm still on the phone, so I write "can I go to Sapporo for the weekend?" on a notepad and hand it to her. She writes back that I can go as long as I bring her a souvenir. It's exciting that I've gotten to go on so many trips lately.

In fall, Hokkaido is nice no matter where you visit. We head out for Sapporo on a clear morning. Since I just got back from a trip last week, Sapporo doesn't feel that far away. Gran has to go to the hospital for an examination, apparently. It'll take a while since it's a big hospital, so we decide to go shopping in the meantime. However, when I get into the car, I find that we're headed in the opposite direction from the city centre.

"…Where are we going?"

"Ishikari."

"…Ishikari? Why?"

"I have business there."

"The former curator retired in a villa in Hlatmari."

"The… Former curator?!"

Sakurako-san nods without saying anything. She must still be hung up on that case.

Ishikari is right next to Sapporo, and I honestly don't know where the boundary between them is. After driving through the countryside for a while, we eventually reach the ocean. The water is the same shade of blue as the sky. I open the car window while we go over the hills next to the river. The wind feels good. I can see a big, white wind turbine. I'm excited to see the ocean in an unfamiliar spot. It's always fun to drive along the coast, even if it's the same beach you've seen a million times.

Eventually, we arrive at a row of villas with a beautiful view of the sea. The houses are in all different shapes and sizes. Although not all of them are particularly nice, they give off a different feeling from normal houses. Apparently Shitara-sensei knew former curator Nishio-sensei's address. The two of us have to search for the right house using only the address given to us. We end up getting a bit lost, but eventually arrive at the one-story building we were headed for. One of the windows is open, so Nishio-sensei must be home.

I ring the intercom, and a woman's voice answers back. When I tell her that we're visiting on behalf of professor Shitara, she opens the door right away. Unfortunately, the woman who greets us is a caretaker in her 40s, not a relative. She has short hair and laugh lines by her eyes. She looks friendly and approachable. I explain to her that we heard from professor Shitara that Nisho-san lived here. Sakurako-san actually met Nishio-sensei when she was a kid, since she visited with her uncle before.

"How unusual, Nishio-sensei hates young girls."

"I was never a noisy child. He liked me since I was mature and intelligent for my age. He used to always say, 'honestly, adults are so stupid—"

"'They can't even tell the difference between a child and a wild beast'?"

The caretaker laughs as she finishes Sakurako-san's sentence. Apparently that took care of verifying our identities, though, since she lets us into the villa.

"The house is lovely, it's so spacious."

The high ceiling continues from the entranceway to the living room. You can only get this kind of high ceiling in a single story building. Bright, gentle light envelopes us. The large window in the living room gives a view of the evening sun sinking below the sea.

"Sorry, it's so dark and cramped when guests come over. He prides himself in his misanthropy, so he doesn't care much about things like that."

She tells us about how he chose a single story house out of consideration for his advanced age, and also because he has so many books. The floor could fall through from all of them.

"Sensei isn't married, and he's quite stubborn so even relatives don't visit often. There's a few people, like you, who still come by every year to study."

Despite her soft voice, she's quite straightforward. Nishio-sensei seems to be a moody person, so maybe she has to be outspoken to look after him. At least she's giving us a warm welcome. She heads off to prepare some tea.

"Oh, you don't need to worry about that."

“Sensei will get mad at me if I don’t serve you any tea. He always says that I’m not good at housework,” she says, urging us not to hold back. “But… Recently, his dementia has been progressing. He remembers things about bones, but he doesn’t seem to remember his students or friends much anymore… So don’t be offended if he doesn’t recognize you,” she says before directing us into the living room.

There’s a shadowy figure sitting on the couch, illuminated by the big window behind it.

“Sensei, you have guests!”

He must not be able to hear well. I’m startled by how loud the caretaker’s voice is. The figure jumps in surprise, too. I guess he isn’t asleep. As we step closer, I can see that he’s an old man. He has a long, white beard like Santa Claus. He’s wearing glasses, but I can see that his eyes look tired. He has a book about anatomy on his lap, and piles of difficult-looking books written in English piled around him.

“I’m Sakurako Kujou… Masamichi Shitara’s niece. When I was little, I visited you with my uncle.”

Sakurako-san kneels in front of the old man, and speaks more clearly than usual. But he mumbles something unintelligible and looks past us, out the doorway. He must be looking for his caretaker. He looks back at Sakurako-san and grabs her hands tight. He gestures for me to come over, pats me on the back, then points to an empty chair. He must be telling me to sit down. After we both sit down, he opens the book on his lap and seems to be trying to teach us something. I don’t really get it, but Sakurako-san looks like she understands. She answers his questions in English, points to things in the book, and nods along with his explanations. Eventually, he looks satisfied and smiles. I just quietly watch them. If I knew more, I’d be able to take part in this, too… It’s frustrating.

“Oh dear, looks like he caught you.”

I turn to the voice behind me, and see the caretaker standing there holding a tray with a tea set on it.

“He has a bit of a sharp tongue, but he has a good sense of humor, and he’s so knowledgeable… But it’s lonely how he forgets

about me every day," she mutters. It's hot in the sun, so the tea in the glass pot is chilled, and has ice in it. She pours some into cups for us.

"But the human brain is strange, sometimes a memory comes back to him. Occasionally we can have a normal conversation. I look forward to those times every day."

She hands me a glass of tea after placing some in front of everyone else.

"I'm sorry, I'm planning to go shopping tomorrow, so I don't have any tea cakes to serve you."

"Oh no, don't worry about it."

Before I can apologize for not bringing a gift with us, she says, "you're a good kid" with a smile.

"But at this rate, it'll be hard to free your big sister from him, right? Is it okay if I ask you to watch the house for a moment? There's a splendid bakery nearby. I'll be back in 10 minutes," she says as she rushes out of the villa.

I feel bad about how considerate she's being. We're definitely going to be here a while, though. Sakurako-san and Nishio-sensei seem to be having fun, flipping through the pages and chatting like it's a class. While listening to the ice occasionally clinking against the glass, I look past the two of them, and out at the sea. There's seagulls happily soaring across the blue water and vast sky. It's a quiet, gentle Saturday. I've had school work on Saturdays lately, so today feels very luxurious. But we didn't come here to enjoy the scenery of Mourai, or to take classes from elderly scholars.

"Sakurako-san," I softly urge her.

If we're going to ask something we don't want others to hear, now is the best time while the caretaker is still out.

"…"

She looks really sad about it. She must have been having fun with her lesson. There's no getting around it, though. I open up the picture I took at the museum on my phone, and hand it to her. I'll leave the rest to her. I don't mind if we have to go home without hearing anything. We can always come back another day. It might be better to leave these bones buried. Sakurako-san looks down at my

phone for a while, then quietly closes the book the two of them were reading. She takes a deep breath to prepare herself.

"Sensei… I came here to ask you something. It happened a long time ago… I want you to tell me about Eimi Yoshimine."

Nishio-sensei doesn't seem to understand what she's saying. Sakurako-san hands him my phone. It's open to a picture of Romeo and Juliet's skulls.

"Just the skulls in this display were replaced with skulls from people who died recently. I know you wouldn't make a mistake like that," Sakurako-san says in a quiet, calm voice.

Nishio-sensei glances at the phone… Then readjusts his glasses and carefully examines the picture.

"You made this display. If you were involved in her crime in any way, please tell me. Did you help her? At the very least, you didn't tell anyone about how she replaced the skulls. Did she bury them in Lake Notoko? Then she dug them up when she heard about the construction so they wouldn't be discovered, right?"

He groans, rather than reply. That isn't the answer we wanted.

"Why are those bones in the exhibit? What do they have to do with Eimi Yoshimine?" Sakurako-san asks frantically.

But Nishio-sensei loses interest in the picture, and hands the phone back to Sakurako-san.

"I would really like to know. Did you go along with Eimi Yoshimine's sentimentality, against your better judgement? Why? And… What happened between her and her parents? Do those bones really belong to her parents?"

Sakurako-san grips Nishio-sensei's arm tight, her voice growing hoarse, but… He suddenly loses interest in her, and stares out at the blue sea. Only the empty, blue expanse fills his eyes.

"Please… She's already gone. If you die, too, her memory will vanish."

"Sakurako-san…"

No matter how much she pleads, Nishio-sensei won't look at her. Eventually, she lets out a short sigh like she has given up. Then, she looks through her pockets. She brings out a dice caramel. I have

fond memories of them from when I was a kid, but you don't see them much these days.

"Did you forget about this, too?"

Sakurako-san opens the die and takes out the caramel.

"You always gave me these when I was young. I knew gran would never allow it because the caramel would stick to my teeth. But we ate them together in secret. I always looked forward to seeing you, 'Caramel-sensei.'"

Sakurako-san opens the package and puts the treat in her mouth with a lonely, downward gaze. The professor doesn't reach out for a caramel, as though he's forgotten the flavour. Deep down, we were both hoping that those memories still existed within him somewhere. Even if just for a moment, even just one word, I hoped the bones would connect. Time is cruel. The news hasn't reported about the bones found in the museum yet. As things stand, those bones will be forgotten among the plethora of other specimens. The existence of those parents and their child will quietly disappear, as if waves washed them away.

"…You really don't remember Eimi Yoshimine?" Sakurako-san has to force the words out of her throat.

The door opens. The caretaker is back from the shop. She brought back freshly baked croissants, and steam baked pizza for lunch. She suggests we have an early lunch together. We can't ask the professor anything more. Even if we persisted, we wouldn't hear what we want to hear. I feel bad after she went to all the trouble of buying food, but we have to leave. Gran is waiting, too. Sakurako-san has a cold, detached expression. Perhaps she's angry. I'm not sure where exactly the anger is directed, though.

"But Nishio-sensei will only eat Japanese food. I'll have to eat the clam chowder he received as a gift on my own, so please stay for lunch," the caregiver says, stopping us.

Does she get lonely while taking care of him in a place like this on her own? I don't know how to react to her being so insistent.

"No thank you," Sakurako-san says, clearly intent on leaving.

She speaks coldly as she puts on her coat. The caretaker grabs Sakurako-san's sleeve.

“But we haven’t gotten to talk at all.”

“I didn’t come here to talk to you. I was here to see Nishio-sensei.”

Sakurako-san briskly moves toward the entrance. I helplessly chase after her. The caregiver leans against a post behind us, reluctant to part. She watches Sakurako-san put her shoes on.

“If you leave now, you’ll definitely regret it.”

The caregiver murmurs just as Sakurako-san touches the doorknob. I grow increasingly wary from her creepy, threatening words. Suddenly, the caretaker tosses something to me.

“Die caramel?”

It’s one of the caramels Sakurako-san has just eaten.

“It’s an astragal caramel.”

The caretaker narrows her eyes. Sakurako-san was just about to open the door, but she suddenly stops.

“…How do you know that?” Sakurako-san turns around to ask.

“I remember him talking about it a long time ago. He mentioned a little girl who liked bones that he gave die caramel to. Dice supposedly originated from an Egyptian toy called an astragal. They were made from the astragalus bone of sheets or cows.” The caretaker says cheerfully. Sakurako-san looks surprised.

“…It was all a miscalculation.”

“…What are you talking about?”

“With Eimi Yoshimine’s life… With *my* life, the dice would never roll the way I wanted them to.”

Eimi Yoshimine’s Confession

Go ahead and eat. It’s okay, it’s not poisoned. That’s what sensei always used to say. A long story needs delicious food to go with it. The pizza is especially good. Now where should I start… Ah yes, meeting Sakuma-san. Let’s get started, shall we? I’ll tell you about that night.

On the night when I was told that the museum was officially changing the director, I decided to run away with my mom. I was considering quitting, but they told me they would raise my salary and hire me full time, so I held off on my decision. I didn't like the new director or my new coworkers, but it was better than living with my dad. Ever since I left home, I've been worried about my mom. I wanted to save some money, then move somewhere that my dad would never find me. I didn't enjoy working, but thinking about finally being free pushed me to do my best. But mom refused my invitation.

"I can't abandon your father," she said.

Without me, she would definitely die. They didn't even know how to cook rice. Can you believe it? What's the point of cooking if you're just going to get beat up after? I thought my mom was weird. Did all the abuse drive her crazy?

She blamed everything on alcohol. She said he was a good person as long as he didn't drink, and he was planning to quit. Isn't that ridiculous? My father drinks and beats us by choice. There's nothing okay about that.

Even after arguing with my mom, I couldn't leave her alone. I thought that no matter how much she's against it right now, one day she would open her eyes. But just as I was about to force my mom to leave with me with a few days worth of clothes stuffed in a bag, my father came home. He was drinking. He was heavily intoxicated, and incredibly angry. He knew we were trying to escape.

He shouted unspeakable things as disgusting, putrid foam formed at the corners of his mouth while he stuck my mom. He tried to kick me down while I begged him to stop, but the duffel bag acted as a shield. That only made him angrier. He struck me so hard I vomited. Even as a child, he never hit me in the face. He liked my face. But that day, that one strike to the cheek completely shattered my heart. He kept hitting me in the stomach and chest, over and over again… It hurt so bad, I could barely breathe. When I saw him sitting on my mom's back, repeatedly hitting her in the head, I knew I couldn't do anything to resist anymore. I could never forgive him. Soon, my mom went limp and motionless. My father kept hitting her, even after she stopped moving.

It’s my fault.

I should never have tried to make her leave with me.

-No, that isn’t true. It’s all my dad’s fault. If only he wasn’t here…

….Suddenly, I was strangling my father from behind. It felt like my fingers were going to break. In the back of my mind, I was thinking that people like him never die. But once he stopped moving, I was relieved that I’d never have to be afraid of him again. But I also knew that my life was over.

My mom looked straight at me and said, “we have to do something about this.”

I didn’t do anything wrong. I just had to hide his corpse. And so, the two of us dumped his body. We left it at a place where he loved to watch the sunset. We spent hours, frantically digging a hole to put his body in. It was already dark by the time we were done. Eventually, I was too tired, and in too much pain from being hit, to stand. The sound of my mom digging lulled me to sleep. I woke up as dawn broke, but my mom was gone.

At first, I thought she had run away. She betrayed me. She abandoned me. But that wasn’t what happened. At least, I wasn’t betrayed the way I thought I was. My mom was laying in the hole she had dug. She was snuggled up with my dead father.

“I couldn’t kill you in the end, so I’m going on ahead.”

That was all that was written on a single scrap of paper. That’s when I noticed… That hole was so, so deep in order to fit both me and my father. She forced herself to dig that hole all night so that I could lay there with my father, who I killed. As soon as I realised that, something inside of me broke. Mom must have thought that if I hadn’t brought up my stupid idea to run away, he wouldn’t have died. Maybe she was angry. Maybe she thought I wouldn’t be able to live with myself after what I’d done. Maybe she planned to beat me to death in my sleep. Either way, she was planning to kill me. I know

that she couldn't bring herself to go through with it because she loved me. I picked up the shovel. My mom always took sleeping pills at night, so maybe she was just fast asleep. I didn't bother to check. It didn't matter, anyway. She wanted to die. I was disgusted, but I filled in the hole.

I thought it would have been nice if someone had come along and discovered what I was doing, but nobody showed up. I went back to the apartment alone. I cleaned up the apartment, then did nothing but sleep for 3 days. On the fourth day, I went back to my daily life. I thought about turning myself in, but… Once I went back to my day to day routine, I couldn't bring myself to do it. I figured that someone would notice they were missing and track down their bodies eventually. There'd be no point in turning myself in, since someone was going to find out anyway. But nobody put out a search for either of them.

Two years passed, and their bodies still hadn't been discovered. I couldn't do anything anymore. At least I didn't have to live in fear of my father anymore. I could enjoy a little bit more of this quiet life. But still, I'm a murderer. Never knowing when the police would come for me, I panicked at the sound of unfamiliar footsteps. The whole world looked grey. Then, I heard about the new development at Lake Notoro on the news. I thought everything would finally come to an end. I had just finished the last exhibition I worked on with Nishio-sensei. I didn't have any regrets. That evening, I left the house with a shovel. It was a moonless night.

Part 10

"Then you dug up the corpses of your parents?"

"Yes. I was scared. I knew it was impossible, but I was worried my parents would turn into ghosts and attack me."

She tells us about her life up until her "death" while occasionally checking that the tape recorder is still working.

"What happened to the parts besides the skull?" Sakurako-san asks impatiently.

Yoshimine-san smiles and shakes her head softly. “There’s no need to be hasty,” she says, trying to tease Sakurako-san.

“It’s only the flesh that people are afraid of. I dug and dug, and just when I was about to give up… I found their skulls. They turned out to be much prettier than I expected. I was relieved to have found them. Seeing that they were only bones, I wasn’t scared anymore.”

It’s true that bones are a lot less shocking than a full-on corpse. If she’d seen off a relative before, she probably would have seen the ashes and bones after they were cremated. Bones have a sort of silent tranquillity to them.

“Their skeletons were snuggled together, like they were just sleeping. I thought it was beautiful. They were like a perfectly crafted specimen. I thought that god had arranged them like that for me. That miraculous sight… Caused me great despair.”

Lake Notoko’s Romeo and Juliet. It must have been painful for her to relive the moment she buried her parents. Yoshimine-san’s tone doesn’t change, but her eyes are like an open book.

“I think that’s enough.”

Yoshimine-san lets out a deep sigh. As soon as she says that, Nishio-sensei calls from the other room. Yoshimine-san outs his book on the table, helps him lean back in his reclining chair, and covers him with a blanket. He seems to have fallen asleep already.

“I didn’t think I would actually be able to dig them up on my own. I didn’t even want to think about what I’d do after I was finished.”

Yoshimine-san continues to talk while she helps Nishio-sensei, then comes back to sit with us once she’s done.

“I was desperate. There was no point in anything anymore, so I didn’t have any reason to keep digging. I didn’t want to live in fear anymore, so I stuffed their skulls in her bag and drove to the cape. I was going to end it all.”

“Was that the Misaki Line?”

“Yeah, that’s the one. It was my favourite spot to go on drives with my dad. I held on to their skulls and walked to the edge just as the sky started to brighten. It was so quiet…. So beautiful…”
Yoshimine-san nods softly.

I saw the sunrise from the same spot as she had. It's a strange feeling, knowing the scenery can transcend time like that.

"Watching the sun rise, I took her mom's sleeping pills. While I waited for them to kick in, I checked my phone. There was a message from Nishio-sensei. He said I was acting strange the day before, so he was worried about me."

After having lost sight of her own worth, Nishio-sensei's words warmly embraced her heart. Those words saved her, she felt as though she'd been forgiven.

"I was happy to have someone who was concerned about me at a time like that. I left my reply on his answering machine. I told him everything. I figured he was sleeping, so I said thank you and goodbye."

Yoshimine-san had given her final confession, and started to slowly drive the car toward the sea before the medicine fully stole her consciousness.

"It was a hell of a drive to heaven," she says with a lonely smile.

But then, someone forcefully hit the window of the car. It was Nishio-sensei.

"I was glad he was there. I was relieved. I figured the police were going to come arrest me."

Her desire to turn herself in to the police and her desire to run away were at odds with each other. She was glad that it was Nishio-sensei giving her the push she needed. But that wasn't what happened.

"Nishio-sensei dragged me out of the car, shouting at me to escape."

He wasn't taking Yoshimine-san to the police. The two of them left the cape after making it look like Yoshimine-san had fallen into the ocean.

"After replacing the models with the real skulls, I threw everything away and came to Sapporo. He was originally planning to retire and live alone in Ishikari. He had enough money to live the rest of his years comfortably, so he wouldn't mind supporting me, as well.

He said all he wanted was for me to stay with him until he dies. Because he loves me."

She's the person that solitary, old scholar wanted to spend his life with. Yoshimine-san accepted his proposal.

"Since I'm officially deceased, I couldn't make a living with no family register. I thought those two corpses would be found, anyway. At least I had some time I could devote to improving the life of this kind person. I don't really know how to describe this feeling."

While looking at Yoshimine-san's sad smile, I wonder if her feelings are more ambiguous than love between a man and a woman. Did she choose not to reject his love because she wanted to be able to live, or because she didn't want to hurt him? Perhaps it could be both. Or maybe that's just what I want to think.

"But nobody found out about the skulls. My parents' corpses weren't found. I thought it was impossible, but I continued to live with no family register… It's almost funny, isn't it? For these past 15 years, I haven't had a single illness, injury, or even a cavity!"

In an attempt to save her mother, Yoshimine-san killed both her parents. In an attempt to commit suicide, she found a peaceful new life. She gives a self-deprecating laugh at her own miscalculation.

"It's been a long time… He seemed to feel guilty, like he was using my crimes to keep me here, but… The past 15 years have been nothing but bliss. I've learned a lot from him."

She couldn't go to university, but she could learn as much as she wanted here. Lots of scholars have come to visit, so she got to listen to them and talk to them. Maybe that was Nishio-sensei's way of helping.

"My life was peaceful and happy… But it wasn't the kind of happiness I wanted. I'm like a spirit, bound to the place I died, doomed to do the exact same thing every day for the rest of my life. I was already supposed to have died twice, so maybe I really am a ghost. I've thought of jumping off the cliff… But I was never able to go through with it."

Yoshimine-san cries with her hands over her face.

"How can I wish for happiness after what I did?"

Was what she did really a crime? Is she a bad person? All she wanted was a normal life.

“But it’s over now. It’s finally over… I can finally break free of this monotony. I can go back now.”

The sun gently shines over the dining table through the window on the ceiling. Yoshimine-san takes a deep breath as she basks in the light. She looks happy.

Then, the intercom rings. It’s a home care aide who comes to visit sometimes.

“I’m sorry, but something has suddenly come up, so I have to leave.”

Yoshimine-san tells the care aide that Nishio-sensei likes to have lunch as soon as he wakes up, and hands them the contact information for her relatives in case anything comes up. She says that if there’s anything they need to know, it’s in Nishio-sensei’s file. She already has detailed preparations made, since she’s been dreaming of this day for over a decade. Before she leaves, she gently removes Nishio-sensei’s glasses and kisses him on the forehead.

“I’m glad he doesn’t remember who I am anymore… I’d hate to betray my Romeo. I don’t want my lies to kill him.”

She sounds like she’s holding back tears.

“Because he’s the first real family I’ve ever had.”

Final part

Sakurako-san is taking Yoshimine-san to the police station in her car. She’s holding on tight to the tape recorder with her confession from earlier on it. She’s having Sakurako-san drive so she can’t escape anymore. Yoshimine-san didn’t want to drive herself, since she might get scared and run away.

As we move along the coast, I’m reminded of the scenery in Abashiri. I feel like I understand why they chose to live here. No matter where they move, people never forget their hometown. I’ll probably be reminded of Asahikawa for the rest of my life. No matter where I go.

Soon, we arrive at the police box. Yoshimine-san is calm. Sakurako-san looks at her in the passenger seat, then suddenly stops the car in the parking lot across the street from the police box.

“Um…?”

Why here? Yoshimine-san stares at Sakurako-san, puzzled.

“Wait. Before you turn yourself in, tell me why you put them in the exhibit.”

We know the details of her “death”. We know what happened to her parents, too. But there was something else. We still haven’t solved the mystery of the exhibit display.

“…Why do you want to know about that?” Yoshimine-san tilts her head curiously.

“You and the professor are both intelligent people. It’s unbelievable to think you’d just abandon the bones there. So why?”

Sakurako-san really wasn’t satisfied with the “love” explanation. Sakurako-san leans forward, craving the truth. Yoshimine-san’s eyes turn wide with surprise before she breaks into laughter.

“Because it’s a lie.”

“…What?”

“It was all a lie from the start. The Romeo and Juliet thing.”

“What do you mean?”

Before I know it, I’m leaning forward from the back seat.

“The exhibit was something the new curator wanted made. It was supposed to be the centrepiece of the permanent exhibit. It needed to leave an impact. So he came up with that exhibit.”

“Then the display is…?”

“It’s true that they were found together, but it wasn’t actually a double suicide. Nishio-Sensei said they were both covered in marks from violence. They didn’t commit suicide for their love, they were beaten, killed, and then thrown away.”

I look at Sakurako-san. In the end, the scars on those bones turned out to be real.

“Sensei said that it would be our secret, as his way of helping me shoulder the burden of my crime. Maybe it was his way of helping atone for what I did, or maybe he just wanted to get back at the people who drove him out of the museum.”

Nishio-sensei probably figured that if he didn't, they would end up living together for the rest of their lives. He didn't want her to have to take care of him when he got old. Publicly displaying her crime would give her an opportunity to atone for it one day.

"I can't believe you were the first ones to notice! Those people have seen them every day for 15 years!"

She laughs at her "15 years of revenge." She looks so innocent, like a child.

"Umm… Do you remember Shouji-san?" I ask.

She pauses for a moment to think, then I can see on her face as soon as she remembers.

"Yes, he was a good person. He was always kind and considerate. When he started talking about an exhibit, he just couldn't stop himself… He was a bit like Nishio-sensei in that way, it was cute."

"You should contact him. I don't think he would mind."

Yoshimine-san doesn't respond to Sakurako-san's suggestion. She's about to be arrested, but this is also the start of her new life.

After waking up to find that Romeo died, it would have been nice if Juliet found the will to live instead of following him in death. No matter how much she had to lie. I still wouldn't want her to choose death. I'd prefer a strong Juliet who doesn't give up on life.

I watch as Eimi Yoshimine-san walks straight into the police station.

Third Bone: Where is my home? Part 1

Part 1

It's autumn, the season of food, and lots of people are coming to visit.

"Shou-chan's mom, could I have another bowl of rice? It's totally different when you use an expensive rice cooker. This fried eggplant and pacific saury are delicious! It's so nice and melty!"

"Geez, Utsumi-kun… You always get over excited and act like it's a feast or something," my mom says as she gets him another

bowl, but her expression says she doesn't really mind.

"Sometimes I just want to eat a lot of your family's food~"

Since he moved nearby, Utsumi-san has been visiting my house once or twice a month for dinner. It's true that my mom's cooking is really good, but he's probably doing it to cut back on food expenses. He treats us to yakiniku when he gets his paycheque, though. I guess he just likes being around other people and eating together. Utsumi-san's parents live in Asahikawa, but apparently they say a lot of things that make him uncomfortable.

"My oldest child loves fried eggplants. From summer to fall, I end up making it at least once a week."

The flesh of the eggplant is sweet and rich, and the finely chopped green onion, ginger, and garlic have a fantastic texture when paired with the fried eggplant. The acidity of the vinegar and spiciness from the chili peppers means I can eat an infinite amount of rice with it. My mom laughs as she talks about how my brother ate a lot of it last week.

"Oh, your brother came back? You should've introduced me to him."

"Why on earth would I introduce you to my brother, Utsumi-san?"

"Because I'm your best friend, of course!" Utsumi-san says, laughing cheerfully. "Oh yeah! Shou-chan, do you have plans on Sunday?"

Utsumi-san asks after noticing the calendar hung above the phone while he stuffs his mouth with his third bowl of rice.

"Sunday… should be okay, I think? I have a school trip coming up, though."

"A field trip? You're so lucky~. Don't forget to bring me a souvenir."

"You have to get me a farewell gift, then. So, what's happening on Sunday?"

I steer the conversation back to his question. Utsumi-san is chatty, so if you don't keep a good handle on steering the conversation, you'll get way off track.

“Oh, right. Ii-chan’s new mom invited me to the littler kiddo’s birthday party on Sunday. I wanted you and Kujou-san to come, too, if possible.”

Ii-chan, or Yuuka Tominaga-chan, was a victim of an incident I got involved in during summer last year. I met Ii-chan after she escaped from her mom’s boyfriend after he killed her mom. Utsumi-san, Sakurako-san, and I found out where she lived. We discovered her little brother, who her mom lost her life protecting. They have now both been adopted by her mom’s second cousin’s family.

“Little A-chan” was in bad condition when we found him, but apparently he recovered quickly, and now he’s been growing up fast.

“Ah… Actually, what was the baby’s real name?”

“Haruku-kun. Ii-chan has been getting a lot better at talking lately. She’s always had a hard time with “k” sounds, but she’s almost got it down now.”

“Now that I think about it, she always called Hector ‘Hetter’.”

She couldn’t pronounce “little,” or “boy,” either. Even her name, Yuuka, somehow became “Ii-cha” from her mysterious accent. At least we can all laugh about it now. My heart aches when I think about their late mother, but I’m glad they’re both growing up well.

“The kid would be happy to see you, so why don’t you come with me?”

“I’d be happy to go. I think Sakurako-san would be, too.”

“I’m glad!” Utsumi-san looks really relieved when I agree, but… He looks up at me with a mischievous grin. “Well… Actually, their new mom is called Naho-chan. She went to the same high school as me, but since she’s younger, we didn’t know each other back then. We’ve been emailed back and forth a lot lately, so we’ve gotten pretty close.”

“…Isn’t she married?”

“Yeah, I know that! She’s pregnant, too!”

“Oh, really?”

Utsumi-san is always looking for a girlfriend, so I always get suspicious when he talks about women. I guess my worry was unfounded this time.

“Huh? But I thought she adopted those two because she couldn’t have children of her own…”

“Yeah, apparently her fertility treatment was unsuccessful for a long time, but now they’ve suddenly been blessed with a miracle.”

I’ve heard of that happening before. Some people say that once you give up on having biological kids, it reduces stress, which allows your body to conceive. Others say that kids are a gift from god.

“It’ll be nice for those two to have a new younger brother or sister.”

“Well, it’s definitely not a bad thing, but…” Utsumi-san trails off as he gathers the last bit of rice in his bowl with his chopsticks. “… I’m a bit worried about whether the little ones will be treated the same after she has her own kid. Even if the mom is fine, I wonder if her husband and relatives will truly be able to treat them equally.”

“But their new dad is Ii-chan’s real mom’s relative, right? They’re related by blood, so it should be okay.”

“I guess so. But… he seems like he’s not quiiite ready to perform the role of being a father.”

It seems like this woman decided to become a mother because she was determined to love her children no matter what. When she was young she didn’t have much of a family of her own, so she firmly decided she’d create a big, happy family on her own.

“Also… I’m worried the kiddo is pushing herself too hard.”

“What do you mean?”

“It’s normal to expect some resistance when Naho-chan became their mom, but she just went with it so easily… Her mom has been feeling under the weather lately, so she’s been helping out. She’s too well behaved, it makes me worried.” Utsumi-san puts down his bowl, and rests his chin on her hands against the table.

I really want to think that Ii-chan always has that cute smile on her face, and is having a fun, wonderful life with her new mom, but Ii-chan isn’t a baby.

“Souta-kun, the husband, seems glad that she’s never rebellious or selfish, but… she’s at an age where there’s a lot she doesn’t understand, you know?”

“I’m not so sure about that,” My mom says as she places a cup of post-meal tea in front of Utsumi-san.

“Hm?”

“Well, when you’re about 4 or 5 years old you learn to read adults’ expressions. That girl probably knows to hold back what she wants to say about her father. She understands that if she says some things, it’ll make people sad.” My mom sits next to us, and glances at me while she sips her tea. “She can understand the situation, even if she’s very young. She knows that she’s safe where she is, so all her parents need to do is act normal and show her a little extra love every now and then,” she says. Now that I think about it, my brother would have been around Ii-chan’s age when our mom got remarried to my dad.

“But… Even if she’s fine for now, she’ll probably complain or be upset once she’s older.”

“That’s right. Everyone has an outburst of emotion every now and then. That’s part of growing up. You just have to love people 100 times more than you fight with them. There’s no point in worrying over it.”

My mom sets down her teacup, and invites Utsumi-san to have a beer. She takes two cans of beer out of the fridge and pours them into glasses. She sighs when she sits back down.

“In the end… Every family has its secrets and problems.”

Her words resonate with me. I’ve seen plenty of those “secrets” and “problems” first hand. Sometimes they even lead to murder. I’m sure Utsumi-san feels the same way.

“…Sakurako-san said something like that to me before. Even she and gran aren’t related by blood.”

“Yeah, there are only a handful of mothers out there who confidently believe they’ve done everything right while raising their kids. You can think you’ve raised a good kid, then they suddenly get stabbed and end up in the hospital.” My mother glances at me.

Ah… Maybe I shouldn’t have said that. Utsumi-san forces a smile while he watches my mom pour the beer.

“…What I’m trying to say is… I know it isn’t that simple, but I want to do whatever I can to make sure the kiddo is happy. That day,

she trusted me to help her mom…”

He still feels guilty that he couldn’t save her.

“I understand. Let’s all celebrate, then.”

I nod. Utsumi-san and I were thinking the same thing.

Fall brings to mind a lot of feelings, like loneliness, heartache, and yearning. The fall of my second year of high school stabbed like a knife, draining the blood from my heart.

Part 2

The Tominaga family lives near Kaguraoka park. It’s a brand new house on a hill. As soon as I get out of the car, I can smell burning grass. I wonder if they’re burning the fields nearby?

Sakurako-san brought one of gran’s homemade pumpkin pies, and I brought roast beef made by my chef grandpa. It’s been a long time since I last saw Ii-chan and her brother, so I’m excited to see how much they’ve grown. I don’t think Ii-chan will have forgotten about me, but Haruku-kun was just a baby at the time. I just hope I don’t make him cry.

I ring the intercom.

Utsumi-san says, “it’s Utsumi,” into the microphone before we even get a response. I can hear footsteps rapidly approaching.

“Utsumi-san!”

A beautiful, slender woman in her early 30s opens the door. I want to remind Utsumi-san again that she’s married.

“Huh? W-what happened?”

Her expression suddenly changes, but neither Utsumi-san, Sakurako-san, nor I know why. She looked cheerful at first, but now she looks impatient and worried.

“Utsumi-san! It’s Yuuka! She’s not here!”

The woman falls to her knees and cries into her hands. Sakurako-san has a grim expression on her face.

“If you have time to cry, you have time to explain. What happened, exactly?” Sakurako-san asks in her usual, detached tone.

She has a point, though. Crying won't solve anything.

"It's okay, there's no need to cry. We'll find her," Utsumi-san says gently, trying to get her to talk.

Naho-san's face is covered in tears, but she nods and leads us inside the house.

The living room is bright with natural sunlight, and is covered in photos of Ii-chan and little A-chan. There's lots of cute pictures that Ii-chan must have drawn hung up on the walls, too. There's a bright, colourful cover on the couch, and the coffee table has sponges on the corners for safety. This place is a lot cleaner and warmer than the house Ii-chan used to live in. Unfortunately, Ii-chan isn't here.

"Yuuka has a friend from kindergarten who lives two houses down from us. It's close, and those two are always going back and forth between houses, so I let her go alone today."

Ii-chan baked cookies this morning for the party. They're black and white cookies that look like penguins and pandas.

"They turned out well, so she said she wanted to bring some to her friend. I told her she could go, since it's so close…"

Of course, she was careful at first, no matter how short the distance was, but when visiting her friend's house became a routine, she got careless. Besides, it only takes a few seconds to walk there. When Ii-chan didn't return right away, Naho-san thought she was just playing to her friend for a bit. Her husband had taken the younger child to his grandma's house, so Naho-chan was happy to be able to prepare for the party without interruptions.

"How long has it been?"

"…Apparently she left right after delivering the cookies. So… She's already been gone for three hours."

"Three hours… You can make it quite far in that amount of time." Sakurako-san quietly clicks her tongue.

Tears overflow from Naho-san's eyes once again. Just then, I hear the sound of the garage opening, and a car engine.

"That's my husband. He must be back from his parents' house," Naho-san says, sniffling as she wipes her face with the back of her hand.

I can hear a man and a woman arguing outside.

“My mother in law is with him. She’s a very strict person… She must have said something again,” Naho-san mutters in a self deprecating tone. She steels herself, then goes to greet the two of them at the door.

“Naho!” A young man bursts through the door. This must be her husband, Souta-san.

It might be a rude way of putting it, but they’re like the beauty and the beast. Naho-san is so slender, like she could fall apart at a moment’s notice. In contrast, her husband is a solid, muscular man.

“I’m sorry… She disappeared.”

“Are you sure? She isn’t at her friend’s house?”

“No, she isn’t…”

A striking woman with thin eyebrows enters the house, carrying a young boy who’s wearing pants with a cute monster on the bum. He must be Haruku-kun. He looks a lot like Ii-chan.

“That’s why you can’t just suddenly become the parents for an older child! You shouldn’t take in children if you can’t look after them properly! How do you expect to become parents if you don’t understand how kids behave?!” The “strict mother in law” that we were told about starts shouting as soon as she gets into the living room.

Haruku-kun notices us, and clings to his grandma’s neck due to shyness around strangers, causing the mother in law to notice us.

“You need to be careful,” she says, hastily trying to soften her words after noticing there are guests.

“But mother, even you said it’d be sad to let them go into a facility…”

“I don’t know which would be better at this point. You may just want to pretend to be a family, but children aren’t just tools to make their parents happy.”

“Now, now, calm down. I’ll get in touch with my colleagues right away to help find this missing girl. There’s no need to fight.” Utsumi-san gets between Naho-chan and her mother in law, and pats Haruku-kun on the head. Despite softening her tone a bit, the mother in law is still being rude.

Naho-san looks disheartened. She clenches her apron. The mother in law is still angry, and hugs Haruku-kun while berating Naho-san. She reminds me of my Nagayama grandma. My grandma is always strict with me because we're not blood related. Even without blood ties, there can still be love. Unfortunately, it's still fragile. Sometimes you have to put in the effort to tighten the knot to keep it from unraveling.

"That's enough, you're annoying," Sakurako-san says to the mother in law.

"What did you just say to me?"

"If you're just going to get in the way, then shut up! We need to find that girl. Utsumi, call the police." Sakurako-san pushes the mother in law out of the way, and sits beside Naho-san. "Anyway, tell us what you know," she says.

"I tried my best to be a good mom… How could I be so careless…" Naho-san mumbles while she cries.

"Regret won't help her. Even if you know what you did wrong, it doesn't fix the situation at hand. Don't cry, it's wasting precious time. We have to do whatever we can to get Yuuka back as soon as possible."

Sakurako-san grabs Naho-san's shoulders and forces her to look up. I can see the light returning to Naho-san's eyes.

"What time did she leave the house? Be as precise as you can."

"Her favourite anime ends at 8:55, so she left right around then."

"On my days off, we often walk to the park around that time. We always see a Great Pyrenees dog walking near the park that Yuuka loves, so maybe she went to see him on her own. That girl… Has no problems going off on her own," Souta-san says while giving Naho-san an encouraging pat on the back. "I thought she was getting wiser about it recently, though. A police officer gave a crime prevention class at her kindergarten, and she's so different from how she was a year ago, but…"

"Things are different now, but when I was around Yuuka's age, I loved going for walks on my own. Utsumi, look after the house. You,

too. Look after the younger child. Naho, if you're well enough, show me the friend's house."

Sakurako-san instructs Utsumi-san, the mother in law, and Naho-san in order. "I'm counting on you," Souta-san says. Sakurako-san nods.

"Let's visit the neighbours , then."

Even though Naho-san is older, Sakurako-san has completely stopped using honourifics with her. Thankfully Naho-san seems relieved by Sakurako-san's confidence, rather than offended. I can tell that Sakurako-san is unusually anxious, though. She's pale, and her breathing is shallower than usual. She's probably both worried about Yuuka-chan, and uneasy about the idea of a missing child.

The four of us leave the house. Sakurako-san, Naho-san, and I head to Yuuka-chan's friend's house that's two doors down. It really isn't far away. It only took me around 20 steps. Of course, I'm not saying it was okay to be careless, but I don't entirely blame Naho-san for getting complacent.

"Are you sure she isn't here?"

"I'm so sorry! I knew I should have gone with her!" the friend's mom shrieks. She hugs Naho-san while apologizing profusely. Her eyes are all red. She's trembling. She must be feeling more than just guilt. Her own daughter walks the exact same path to the Tominaga house all the time. She must be thinking that her own child could have been the one to disappear.

"I called Kei-chan and Non-chan's houses, but she isn't there, either. Everyone said they would help look for her. I'm going to check the kindergarten and Kaguraoka park right now. Yuuka-chan's mom, you should go home and rest. You're anemic, right? I know they call it the stable period, but you're only 16 weeks pregnant…" She's worried about Yuuka-chan, but she has the baby she's carrying to worry about, too.

"But…" Naho-san tries to insist on helping, but we all want what's best for her.

We decide to take Naho-san home. But I know how anxious and frustrated she must feel, just waiting at home.

“You’ll only get in the way. Besides, she’ll want you to be the first one to greet her when she gets home,” Sakurako-san says.

Naho-san reluctantly agrees to stay put, so we set out again. Souta-san joins us, since he just finished asking the neighbours if they saw anything. He looks depressed.

“Nakamura-san from next door wasn’t home, but nobody else has seen her.” Souta-san says that he asked everyone up to four houses away.

“We’ll have to expand the scope of our search, then,” Sakurako-san says. “Let’s go to that park, first.”

On the way to the park where Yuuka-chan likes to play with the big dog, we ask each of the houses we pass. I hope that at least one person has seen her. The street isn’t a very steep slope, but the property has a tall wall around it for privacy. As I feared, nobody here has seen her.

“She’s a nice girl. She has good manners, and she always says hello with a smile. I picked too many strawberries one time, so I gave her some. She started calling me ‘strawberry lady’ after that.” The woman living at the bottom of the hill says.

She has a wonderful kitchen garden in her yard. After turning the corner from this house, it’s only 50 meters to the park.

“When I work in the garden in the morning, she always waves at me from the bus on her way to kindergarten. I’m worried about her because she’s so sweet, and she isn’t scared of strangers,” the man says.

Unfortunately, the couple finished their work early this morning, so they were already inside by the time Yuuka-chan left the house. They say that they haven’t seen any suspicious cars around this morning, though.

“Our daughter is coming to visit us today. We’ll get her to help us search,” The couple generously offer.

I’m glad everyone in the neighbourhood loves Yuuka-chan, but I’m worried about how she isn’t wary of adults at all. As soon as we leave the old couple’s house, Sakurako-san shouts, “dang it!” to the sky.

“Sakurako-san… It’s okay. Just calm down. We’ll find her for sure.”

“I am calm. It’s just… I want to find her this time,” Sakurako-san says quietly.

This time. I don’t think she meant to say that. I know she’s thinking of someone else, not Ii-chan. My chest feels tight. I’ll definitely find Ii-chan, both for her family’s sake, as well as Sakurako-san’s sake.

For the rest of the walk to the park, the three of us split up to ask around at different houses. Unfortunately, not a single person has seen Ii-chan this morning. At least it isn’t cold out, but… It hurts to think that such a young girl is wandering around out there, with no food or water. Souta-san walks back to me with a disappointed expression and a big sigh.

“…She said she wanted to get a dog.” He says, rather than telling me how his search went.

“A dog?”

“Yeah, a big one. She loves dogs, but we’d only just found out that Naho was pregnant… I said no, because we couldn’t handle a dog on top of 3 kids. If I’d let her get one… This might not have happened.”

He must be thinking that Ii-chan decided to walk to the park alone to see the dog she likes to play with. Souta-san says that he has only ever met the dog on walks at the park, so he doesn’t know where it lives. I try to comfort him by telling him that the dog’s owner might be looking after her, but he points out that the owner would have reported a lost child to the police already.

Eventually, we make it to the park without any clues to go off of. Since Kaguraoka park is nearby, this park is just a small one with some playground equipment.

“Have you seen a little girl?”

“We’ve been here for around 2 hours, but we haven’t seen her,” Two boys around elementary or middle school age tell me. They’re sitting on a bench under the park’s wisteria trellis, playing video games.

“I heard that Tamura-niichan had a girl on his lap earlier. I’ll go home and ask him.” One of the boys laughs.

Apparently Tamura-niichan is a middle school student that lives next door to the boy. Now isn’t the time to be jealous of younger kids being in love, though.

Sakurako-san looks around the park with a terribly grim expression.

“What’s wrong?” The playground equipment consists of a slide, a swing, a bench, and two brightly coloured spring riders. There used to be a sandbox, but it’s a flower bed now due to sanitation concerns, apparently. “It just seems like a normal park…”

“It’s enclosed.”

“Enclosed…?”

Does the park seem that small? I look around the park, then up at the sky. I really don’t see how it isn’t just an ordinary park.

“The border privet is tall. You can’t see in from the outside. Especially not something the height of a child.”

“Oh…”

Sakurako-san points at the hedges around the park as she talks. She’s right that they’re tall. They must be around 150cm. At Ii-chan’s height, she’d be completely hidden.

“It’s a place where a middle school student can have a girl on his lap. No one outside can see what’s going on. It’s a total blind spot,” she says, clicking her tongue.

Even an adult couldn’t be seen from outside if they crouch down. Since the surrounding houses are close together and only one story tall, there’s little hope that someone saw her from a window.

“Is there anyone suspicious around? We’ve been thinking that Yuuka is just lost, but it’s possible she was kidnapped.” Sakurako-san asks Souta-san, but he frowns in confusion.

“But in a residential area during the day…?”

“No one has seen the girl walking around.”

“That’s true, but there aren’t usually many people in the park in the morning when the dog goes for a walk.”

“The road to the park is steep, so people can’t see much from inside their houses. Besides, it’s a residential area, and there’s no convenience stores nearby. There are hardly any security cameras. Nobody would notice if a child was abducted. Then-“ Sakurako-san bites her lip. “…Yuuka is friendly, but she knows not to follow strangers. The culprit might be someone who Yuuka already knows.”

“Yes, she knows better than that. Her kindergarten always tells the kids to be wary of strangers, too,” Souta-san mutters.

She should have been more wary of Utsumi-san or Sakurako-san at first.

“Children are rather helpless, but they’re more vigilant than adults give them credit for. They’re good at sensing danger. That’s why… More often than not, when something bad happens to a child, it’s because of someone they know.”

“So you’re saying I should doubt my acquaintances?!”

“Yes, but not necessarily your neighbours and friends. For example, someone who works at a restaurant or store you frequent could have used it as an opportunity to get close to her. When you weren’t paying attention, they could have gotten her to let her guard down.”

“…”

There’s still a chance that she wasn’t kidnapped at all, but we can’t think of this as just a simple lost child case. Souta-san is trembling.

“Has anything changed recently?”

“No, nothing… Oh…” Souta-san says.

“Well… I don’t know if this is related, but… There’s been two instances where I found butterfly wings in the mailbox.”

“…Butterfly wings?”

“Yeah. I thought a small cabbage white had just slipped in by accident, but… It had beautiful wings with yellow streaks, like a Chinese peacock butterfly… It creeped me out.”

I’m the one who’s trembling, now. There’s no way it could be…

“Does anything else come to mind? Has anyone been upset with you-“

“No, nothing!”

Sakurako-san is shocked for a moment, but manages to keep asking her insensitive questions. Souta-san is clearly uncomfortable.

“You’d have to be a saint to say so confidently that nobody has ever held a grudge against you,” Sakurako-san scoffs.

“That’s not what I meant…”

“If you have something to say, you’d better speak up before something bad happens.”

“I already told you, nothing happened!”

There’s no doubt that Souta-san is grateful that we’re helping look for his daughter, but I’m sure he isn’t a fan of how rude and strange Sakurako-san is.

“I’m going to look somewhere else,” he says angrily.

Sakurako-san is only acting rude because she knows that Hanabusa only targets “bad people.” She must think that Ii-chan is only being targeted to punish her guardians. But I don’t think Naho-san or Souta-san are bad people. However, I do think that Souta-san’s reaction was a little too extreme. It would be nice if it turned out that a butterfly did just accidentally fly into the mailbox. It would be one hell of a coincidence, but it’s still possible. I don’t think Hanabusa would target Ii-chan. But if he’s targeting someone close to her, it could be our fault…

The boy comes back and says, “Tamura-niichan didn’t see a little girl.”

He doesn’t know where the Great Pyrenees lives, but he saw it on a walk earlier, and there weren’t any children with it. We’ve hit a dead end. I can’t stop thinking about the butterfly wings.

We decide to head back to the Tominaga house. It’s just past 1pm now. It’s been over 4 hours since Ii-chan went missing. I haven’t had lunch yet, so my stomach is rumbling. I hope Ii-chan isn’t hungry right now. I just want her to go home safe, no matter what it takes.

Part 3

When we get back to the Tominaga house, Ii-chan’s grandma is making onigiri for us. Naho-san is sitting on the couch. She doesn’t seem to have an appetite, but she’s reluctantly eating for the sake of

the baby she's carrying. The onigiri have slightly sweet scrambled eggs and bonito flakes in them

"That girl doesn't like pickled plums because they're sour, but she also doesn't like it when there's only bonito flakes, so I always add eggs to them. She won't eat salmon because of the bones, either. She's such a selfish kid," the mother in law says coldly.

She must be referring to Ii-chan. I'm a bit relieved that even though the mother in law is so strict, she still shows some affection for Ii-chan. Utsumi-san, who was talking on the phone in the hallway with the officers at the police box, returns to the living room with a stiff expression. It doesn't seem like anyone has contacted them about a lost child that could be Ii-chan.

"Kujou-san… Have you figured anything out?"

"No." Sakurako-san shakes her head as she sits on a dining chair with her legs crossed while thinking.

"You should have some, too, Kujou-san ."

You can't fight on an empty stomach. Sakurako-san hasn't touched the onigiri next to her. I don't have much of an appetite, either, though.

"I know that the stuff you say is usually right, Kujou-san , but right now I'm the one that's right. We don't know what's going to happen, so you have to eat while you can. Even if it's just one piece."

"Utsumi-san…"

Utsumi-san puts a small onigiri on a dish and hands it to Sakurako-san. As she takes the dish from him, she speaks in a hushed voice.

"Kidnapping is still a possibility. The father may know something. Keep an eye on his actions, even with the rest of the family. Hanabusa may be involved," Sakurako-san says just as Naho-san and Souta-san leave their seats for a moment.

"…Huh?"

The mother in law and Haruku-kun are in the adjacent room.

"I'm sorry, but I can't trust the police when it comes to Hanabusa."

"…"

Sakurako-san speaks with a grim expression.

Utsumi-san furrows his brow for a moment before saying “I understand” with a nod. “I’ll put all my strength into looking for the little one. Kujou-san, do your thing. I know… Let’s call Icchan. We’ll need a communications officer. Don’t you think it would be better to share information with the police, though?”

Utsumi-san takes out his phone and calls Isozaki-sensei. “Oh, Icchan? It’s me! It’s me! So you see… Ah!”

But Isozaki-sensei is heartless.

“Ahh! He hung up…”

He picked up the call from Utsumi-san, but hung up without saying anything or hearing what the call was about.

“He’s always so cold to me,” Utsumi-san says through fake tears.

It can’t be helped, so I’ll try calling Isosaki-sensei again.

“It’s you this time, Shoutarou?” Isozaki-sensei says after picking up the phone, sounding displeased.

“Um, you see…”

Sakurako-san yanks my phone out of my hand while I try to explain.

“Isozaki. Come here immediately. I’ll explain later,” Sakurako-san says, then tosses the phone back to me.

“…”

“But I was just about to go to the gym.”

“Sorry…” He sighs on the other end of the line while I helplessly apologize.

“Well, it’s fine… More importantly, didn’t gran teach you what to say when you ask for a favour from somebody, Kujou-san ?”

I reluctantly pass Isozaki-sensei’s sharp words on to Sakurako-san. She crinkles her nose.

“…Fine. I’d like you to please come here soon.”

I hear Isozaki-sensei laughing as I pass along Sakurako-san’s reply.

“I’ll be there in 10 minutes,” he says before hanging up.

Sakurako-san elbows Utsumi-san, who is grinning ear to ear.

She calls out to the Tominaga couple, who are upstairs, to ask about the butterfly wing that was mentioned before. They got a bad feeling from it, so they threw out the actual thing right away. They did take a picture since they were worried about it, though, so they print it out for us.

“This is it, but… It’s not a Chinese peacock butterfly, is it?”

“It’s not,” Sakurako-san says as she receives the picture from Naho-san.

“Chinese peacocks don’t have this distinct yellow line.”

Insects are outside of Sakurako-san’s area of expertise, though. Unless it’s a well known butterfly, or one that’s common in Hokkaido, she won’t know much about it.

“Isozaki might know it, but…” Sakurako-san says as she hands me the photo.

I definitely don’t remember ever seeing it before, either. At the very least, it probably isn’t a species that lives around Asahikawa. But in that case, it’s likely someone put it in the mailbox intentionally.

“Black butterflies are more associated with bad omens than good. This wasn’t the work of someone who means well toward you. It’s not necessarily your fault, it could be one-sided hatred. With that in mind, is there anything you can think of?”

“I can’t think of anyone who hates us, nor can I think of any trouble we’ve gotten into or anything.” It’s been about three years since this house was built. There hasn’t been any major friction with the neighbours , and Souta-san’s work seems to be going well. “Right?” Naho-san asks Souta-san.

“Y-yeah… Of course.” Souta-san says with a nod. I’m not sure if I’m just imagining things, but his expression stiffened for a moment. “So… If it wasn’t kidnapping and she isn’t lost… Maybe Yuuka chose to leave on her own.”

“That can’t be!” Naho-san murmurs as she crumbles onto the couch, looking exhausted.

“It’s progesterone.” Sakurako-san kneels on the floor in front of the couch to get at eye level with Naho-san.

“What?”

“Your body is producing a lot of progesterone. It’s a hormone that is associated with the early stages of pregnancy. In high levels, it can cause one to feel ill or anxious. It can make you jump to the worst conclusions, even if there’s nothing to worry about. It’s not a bad thing, mind you. All women become anxious while pregnant to keep their children safe. While my mother was pregnant with my little brother, she used to cry all the time. Once he was born, she was back to normal. Besides…”

Sakurako-san extends her arm to gesture at the countless pictures of Yuuka-chan and Haruku-kun. She picks one up and holds it out to Naho-san. “If she didn’t love you, she wouldn’t smile like this in all of these pictures.” It’s a picture of Ii-chan smiling and hugging her little brother. They seem to be at a ball pit in some kind of indoor athletic facility.

The parents of Ii-chan’s kindergarten friends called to say that they couldn’t find her at Kaguraoka Park, and were wondering where to search next. While we’re discussing it, Isozaki-sensei shows up. Before we tell him all the details, Sakurako-san shows him a picture of the butterfly.

“A butterfly… I don’t know much about insects, other than garden pests,” Isozaki-sensei frowns. He’s a biology teacher, so he has a lot of general knowledge about living things, but his specialty is plants. “Hmm, but I feel like I’ve seen this one before…” He stares at the picture and plays with his bangs.

“Do you know what kind it is?”

“…No, sorry. It’s just one wing, after all. I’ll see if I can find someone who can identify it for you.” He takes a picture of it on his phone and sends off an email. I hope he gets a reply sooner rather than later.

We tell Naho-san that we’re going to look around outside for the time being. It’s mostly so that we can explain the situation to Isozaki-sensei privately, though. We brief him on what happened to Ii-chan, and by the time we get to explaining about the butterfly in the mailbox, he has a good idea of what’s happening. I suddenly feel someone looking at me, so I turn around.

“Ah…”

It’s one of the neighbours . They must be wondering why we’re whispering in front of the Tominaga house. If I’m not mistaken, Souta-san called her Nakamura-san. Based on the bag she’s carrying, she must be on her way home from grocery shopping. She’s staring at us with a puzzled expression.

“Do you live here?”

“Huh? Yes… What are you doing?” She replies to Sakurako-san as the autumn breeze lightly ruffles her short hair.

“Yuuka is missing. Have you seen anything? Anything you can tell us is helpful. Did anything happen this morning?”

“Really? Yuuka-chan is?” Nakamura-san’s whole demeanor changes when we mention her.

“She went to deliver cookies to her friend’s house, but didn’t come back. It’s already been about five hours.”

She seems to grasp the situation after being filled in a bit more. “But why did she do that?”

“It’s her younger brother’s birthday, and Naho was busy preparing for it on her own. She thought Yuuka was just playing at her friend’s house. She never thought that Yuuka would go off alone and not return.”

“I see… Unfortunately, I’ve been inside the whole time. I’m sorry, I haven’t seen anything. I decided to stop by the new grocery store before going to my daughter’s house… It was around 9:50, but I didn’t run into Yuuka-chan. If I’d seen her walking alone, I would have taken her back with me.” Nakamura-san shakes her head with a grave expression.

Well, that’s about what I expected. When I first met Ii-chan, I couldn’t leave her alone so I took her to the police box.

“You really can’t think of anything? You were wary of us because you haven’t seen us around before. Is there a reason you’re so cautious? It doesn’t matter what it was, just tell us if you saw anything during that time.”

“You’re right, but I really…” Just as she’s about to say something, she suddenly remembers something. “Now that you mention it,” she says as she adjusts her grip on the key in her hand. “There was a delivery person from a shipping company in the area

around the time Yuuka-chan disappeared. I didn't see them directly, but I could hear it. The engines have a unique sound, you know? They might have seen something. There's a distribution center nearby, so you can go check there."

"Thank you so much. We'll go there."

Nakamura-san takes out her smartphone and politely shows us where the company is. "She usually keeps a good eye on the children. She really does," Nakamura-san tells us before we part.

"We think so, too."

"I see… Well, even the most careful parents will have a moment of panic once or twice at least. But there's times where you can't just go 'ah, that was close,' and brush it off. The people who had everything turn out okay don't have the right to shout at and criticize the people who had the worst happen. It's a miserable time," Nakamura-san says softly.

She looks like she's only a little older than my mom. She stares up at the cloudy sky. It's true, a lot of people said horrible things when Ii-chan's birth mom died. Both people with and without children of their own. People who raise children must be under a lot of pressure to do everything right. As I look over my shoulder, my eyes meet with Naho-san's. She's standing on the balcony, looking outside.

"We will definitely find her," I think to myself as I give her a firm nod.

She nods back. Her eyes soon become warped by sadness. I look at Sakurako-san, only to see she has the exact same eyes. We'll definitely find her. We have to.

Part 4

"I sent an email to the Papillon Chateau, and they said they'd investigate it and get back to me," Isozaki-sensei says to me as we get into Sakurako-san's car to head for the distribution centre .

"Is that in Touma?"

The place where Sakurako-san's aunt donated paintings to. There were butterfly specimens from all over the world there.

While we're talking, we arrive at the distribution centre .I feel bad for interrupting his work, but I call out to one of the employees that's running around. Fortunately, after I explain the situation to him, he calls over the driver who was delivering around the neighbourhood that Ii-chan lives. He's a young, friendly looking man who wears glasses. I know that we're bothering him, but he doesn't let it show. He smiles and listens to what we have to say. I ask him if he saw a girl walking by herself.

"A little girl… No, I don't think I saw her… Probably," the man mumbles.

"Why do you sound hesitant?"

"Well, I did see a young girl walking alone, but she got into a car and left."

"A car?"

"Yeah."

"Did she look like this?" I hand the deliveryman a photo of Ii-chan that I borrowed.

"I think she looked similar, but… I can't say for sure…" He was working, so he must not have gotten a good look. "But it didn't seem like she was being kidnapped. The girl was smiling, and she was going with a young woman."

"A young woman? What did she look like?"

"I called her a woman, but she was more like a girl… She looked like she was in her teens, maybe early 20s. The kid ran over and gave her a big hug. The person driving was a woman, too. I figured they were her aunt and sister or something."

Isozaki-sensei has stayed silent this whole time. His expression is grim.

"Why did you think they were related?" Sakurako-san asks sternly.

"I didn't think either of them were her mom, since the kid looked surprised when they called out to her. Also… I think I might have heard one of them say, 'I'll take you home,' or something…"

Take her home… Were those women just pretending to know Ii-chan to get her to go with them? We check with the delivery man

to make sure the girl he saw wasn't wearing the same outfit that Ii-chan had on today. I ask again what the girl he saw looked like.

"I mean… She looked similar, but I was in the middle of work… She was thin and cute, but I don't know exactly how she looked…" He apologizes for not paying close enough attention. He doesn't give any mind to things that don't get in the way of his work.

"Do you remember what time you saw her at?"

"Yeah, it was around 9:15. It was definitely before 9:30." It makes sense that he'd remember, since his job is time-sensitive.

"Is there anything else that you can remember? Was the child holding anything, for example?"

"Let me think…" The man stares at the ceiling while he thinks. "Oh, come to think of it, the kid was wearing resin sandals with light-up heels. I didn't know they made sandals like that. And also…" He stares into space, lost in thought again. "Actually… There was something else that was bothering me about the younger woman." The delivery man stares at another delivery truck that just pulled into the parking lot. "We made eye contact through the side mirror as they drove past me. The look in her eyes was like… She was pleading for help or something."

Isozaki-sensei looks pale.

"But I don't think she was being forced into going or anything. Her behaviour didn't seem off to me. She didn't look like she was kidnapping a random lost kid, though. It was probably just my imagination."

The spot where he saw this happen was right between Ii-chan's house and the park. It wouldn't have been a distance they would bother to drive her to.

We thank the delivery man for his time, then head back to the car. I phone Naho-san to ask about what shoes Ii-chan wore when she left, and sure enough, her light up sandals are missing. They were still too big for her, so she wasn't allowed to wear them on walks, so she must have wanted to wear them in secret when she was alone. Still, they're just from the supermarket, and they're

popular in her kindergarten class. Those particular sandals aren't as rare as I thought. We can't determine whether or not it was Ii-chan based on just her shoes.

There's the issue with the young woman, too. Naho-san says she has no idea who it could be.

"If it were a premeditated crime, they probably made contact with the child in advance. That way it won't arouse suspicion," Sakurako-san says in a low voice.

"A young woman, huh…" If Hanabusa really is involved, then two young women in particular come to mind.

"…It wasn't Hitoe. She's no longer Hanabusa's butterfly," Isozaki-sensei mutters, as if he can see inside my head. He's been staring out the window silently until now.

"How can you be sure?" Sakurako-san asks. She's done up her seatbelt, but doesn't start driving yet.

"She has a boyfriend now. She's crazy about him. Hitoe has always been good at ignoring bad things. As soon as she found something new that she liked, she immediately forgot about everything else."

"Really… Even after everything that happened back then?!" Even though she was being controlled, she still killed Futaba-san, led Minami-san down a dark path, poisoned her pet dog, and was instrumental in Nazuna-san's attempt suicide.

"Well then, Shoutarou, do you think people who make a mistake should be unhappy for the rest of their lives?" Isozaki-sensei says in a strangely irritated voice.

"I wouldn't go that far, but… It just seems too soon…"

"I see. In that case, how many years should have to pass? One? Five? Ten? What's that going to change?"

"…" I can't answer his question. Even five years from now, if I hear she'd forgotten everything and was living happily, it wouldn't sit right with me.

"I don't think it's bad to get over things quickly. It's best to move on. Whether it's through strength or trickery, you have to keep moving forward. But Minami isn't like that." He sighs, creating a cloud on the window glass.

“But Minami-san is—“

“Sometimes she just doesn’t understand. She’s given up on Hanabusa now, but that might just because she knows she can never reach him… She’s still trapped in the past.”

I always thought Minami-san was the most sane… Or rather, not as poisoned by Hanabusa as Futaba-san and Hitoe-san were, since they were in the most danger.

“So you’re saying that if Hanabusa comes back, Minami could change her mind again?”

Isozaki-sensei can’t deny it, so he doesn’t reply.

Hitoe-san is loved by her parents, and has many people to look out for her. Minami-san, on the other hand, can’t go back to live with her parents, so she’s barely scraping by. It was the same both before and after the incident.

Isozaki-sensei tries to phone Minami-san and Hitoe-san, but neither of them pick up. Seeing Isozaki-sensei staring at his phone screen, I understand why he bothered to come here today. It wasn’t because Sakurako-san and I asked him to. It’s not just because he’s worried about Ii-chan. He must be worried that Hanabusa and Minami-san could be behind this incident.

“It’s not Minami,” Sakurako-san says with her hands on the steering wheel.

“What makes you say that?”

“It’s simple. That wing wasn’t from a diantha treebrown.”

“Huh?”

“That girl already has diantha treebrown wings on her back. But that’s not the kind of butterfly the wing was from. Therefore, the culprit is a different butterfly.”

Just then, Isozaki-sensei’s phone starts ringing. I was expecting it to be from Minami-san or Hitoe-san, but that doesn’t seem to be the case. He lets out a relieved sigh as he picks up. I turn down the volume on His Excellency, Diavel’s beautiful singing voice so it doesn’t interrupt his call. Apparently the call is from the person at Papillon Chateau who was looking into the butterfly wing that was found. Sensei looks surprised during the call, then soon hangs up with a confused expression.

“What’d they say?”

“They found out about the wing… But…”

“But?”

Isozaki-sensei hesitates for a moment before answering Sakurako-san’s question. “It… Doesn’t seem to be a butterfly. Well, they’d call it one in France.”

“So a moth, then?” Sakurako-san furrows her brow.

“Yes, they said it’s probably a Milionia basalis.”

“Milionia basalis…”

I’ve never heard of that before.

“It looks like a butterfly, but is classified as a moth. It usually lives in warm places, so they have never been sighted in Hokkaido. It’s a beautiful creature, but unfortunately, it isn’t welcome in its natural habitat,” Isozaki-sensei reads off his online search, then hands me his phone. “They’re not poisonous, but the larvae love to eat common ornamental shrubs like yew plum pine and Asian bayberry plants. They’re greedy, so they eat all the leaves, causing the plants to wither and die. Kyushu has seen several outbreaks of them in the past few years. They store parts from the yew plum pine in their bodies, which makes them taste bad to birds.”

Isozaki-sensei seems to remember this moth after reading a bit about it. I think it’s safe to say that it’s a garden pest.

“But it’s… A moth, not a butterfly.” Hanabusa always refers to the people he manipulates by the names of butterflies. Like how he called Satsuki Usubichi a “common rose,” or how Minami-san has diantha treebrown wings on her back. They’ve all been butterflies until now, so why is it suddenly a moth?

“Taxonomically speaking, butterflies and moths aren’t distinct. They’re both Lepidopterans. A German author known as Hermann Hesse wrote a story of a boy who stole his friend’s butterfly specimen, though we call it a moth in Japan. Hanabusa could just put butterflies and moths in the same category.”

“I see…”

The body of the Milionia basalis looks like a moth, but the attractive yellow and black wings look more like a butterfly’s. If I saw one without knowing what it is, I wouldn’t be able to tell whether it’s a

butterfly or a moth. But is this butterfly really the nickname for the criminal who kidnapped Ii-chan? Just as I hand sensei's phone back to him, a ringtone buzzes through the car.

"…Sorry, that's mine."

I was sure it would be Minami-san or Hitoe-san calling, but the sound is coming from my phone, but it's the default ringtone. If it was a call from a close friend, the ringtone would be a custom song.

"Oh, it's from Kougami's house phone."

After discovering the remains of Kougami's grandmother in Touma, I found their home phone number in the phone book so I could contact them and arrange to visit their family altar. We've never actually contacted each other through this number, though.

"Hello?"

Come to think of it, she never replied to my message last night. Well, I don't really mind since we were just chatting about movies we like and other unimportant stuff. I answer the call in a casual, lighthearted tone, thinking she just broke her cellphone or something.

"Tatewaki-san? This is Yuriko's mother."

"Huh? Oh, hello. Thank you for everything you—"

"Is Yuriko with you? Or could she be at Kujou-san's house?"

Kougami and her mother sound so similar that I'm caught off guard for a second. What's even more confusing is her question.

"No, we're not together today…"

"She went to Ranka-chan's house for dinner and to stay overnight, but when I called, I couldn't get through. When I called Ranka-chan, she said Yuriko never came."

"…Huh?"

"Imai-kun hasn't seen her, and neither have any of her friends from her class in first year."

"Then was she kidnapped?!"

"No, she… probably ran away from home…"

"Ran away?! Kougami did?!" I accidentally start shouting.

"I'll take over," Isozaki-sensei quickly says, holding out his hand.

"Um, hold on a moment. I'm with Isozaki-sensei right now."

If that were true, Azechi would know. I refuse to believe that Kougami ran away from home. If her mother and I don't know, I doubt Isozaki-sensei will know anything, either, but I hand over the phone anyway. Isozaki-sensei thinks for a moment, then puts the call on speaker so that we - no, maybe just so Sakurako-san - can hear it.

"So… Do you have any ideas… about why she hasn't come home?" His question is met with silence, then a deep breath on the other line. "So you do know."

"Yes… Lately, things haven't been very good between my daughter and I. We got into an argument before the last consecutive holidays… Since then, she hasn't spoken to me at all."

"An argument?"

"Yes. It was just something small, about her future…"

If it was really that "small," then the gentle, thoughtful Kougami wouldn't get into a fight with her mother about it. I feel my stomach drop when she mentions the consecutive holidays. Not only did I ignore a sudden call from Kougami during the holidays, but I also told her about how much fun I had on my trip. I feel terrible, thinking about how she must have felt and what she was thinking when I didn't answer.

"I know this is impolite, but do you mind sharing about her personal life? I knew she was concerned about what path to take, but I don't think she would run away from home because of that…" Isozaki-sensei is much calmer than I am. He gently urges Kougami's mother to explain why she thinks Kougami ran away from home.

"My father in law is moving to a nursing home this month. His care requirement status changed to level 4, so he was finally granted permission to enter the facility we'd been applying for…" (TL note: Japanese care for the elderly is rated from 1-5, with 1 being most able, and 5 being least able)

Kougami and her mother have been taking care of Kougami's grandpa ever since his wife passed away. She had to quit tennis to help out, and has to deal with a lot of inconveniences that a normal high school girl wouldn't have.

“I knew that she would be opposed to it, so I didn’t tell her about it beforehand. When she got home from school and found out that he wasn’t there anymore, she got really angry…”

“….You didn’t tell her?”

“No… I figured that even if I brought it up, we would never reach an agreement.”

“So you just kept her in the dark…?”

“Sensei, you said you were worried about her career path, didn’t you? I am, too. All I want is for her to do what she really wants to do. I want her to be able to focus on her exams, so I figured moving her grandpa out, at least until she’s done with exams, would be best.” But Kougami didn’t accept those excuses. “She still thinks that it’s her fault. Even though she knows her grandma didn’t commit suicide, she still thinks that she could have prevented her death if she’d known where she was going beforehand.”

Kougami must think of taking care of her grandpa as a way of atoning for her sin.

“We’re not trying to be selfish. We’ve done all we can for her, but we always seem to come up short… Especially when it’s important. No matter what she says, I want to give her an environment where she can focus on her studies.”

“And… Did you say that to her?”

“Hm?”

“Did you tell her ‘we moved your grandfather to a facility so you could focus on your exams’?”

“…”

Of course we all understand how Kougami’s mother is feeling. Kougami is smart and has studied a lot, so I’d also like her to choose the path she won’t regret, but this is too drastic.

“But Sensei, even you know that girl has been struggling to decide on her future, right?!”

“But when you put it like that, it sounds like you’re blaming her,” Isozaki-sensei replies to Kougami’s frantic , shouting mother after letting out a sigh.

“I just wanted to understand her, so I…”

The three of us struggle to find the words we should say next as her sobs overflow from the other end of the line.

Part 5

After telling Kougami's mother that we'll keep looking for her daughter, we hang up the call. If Kougami doesn't return by the evening, she'll be reported as missing. We decide to at least check if she left a note behind, and try calling her. My head hurts. Not only did Ii-chan go missing, but Kougami did, too. Today has been very unlucky.

"Kougami didn't even do anything wrong…"

"Her mother doesn't agree."

"When she phrases it like that, a serious person like Kougami is bound to be upset. Besides, keeping her grandpa's institutionalization a secret is…"

"No," Isozaki-sensei interjects as I try to object to Sakurako-san's statement.

"Having someone placed in a facility isn't a bad thing. It's not easy taking care of a family member 24/7. Something terrible can happen if you take your eyes off of them for a moment. In those cases, it's better to get help from other people."

"That's true, but…"

Still, not consulting Kougami about it was going too far. If she was worried, she could have talked to me about it. With that in mind, I glance at my phone. There's no sign of any distress in our conversations.

"Oh."

"What is it?"

"It's just that Kougami replied to me at some point, but I didn't notice." She's messaged me during the time she hasn't been home. "…Today's date. About 5 hours ago. The same time Yuuka-chan disappeared."

Sakurako-san turns around to see.

"The little bird is in a soft cage."

“…What the hell?”

Before, we’d just been talking about books and movies we’ve been into lately. The last message was from when I sent “that movie the four of us went to last time was really fun.” It was a sci-fi movie that’s been popular lately. It had nothing to do with “little birds.”

“I don’t remember watching a movie like that… Whoa.” The notification sound surprises me so much that I almost drop my phone. It’s a message from Yuriko’s mom. “Oh, I got a message from Kougami’s mom. Apparently there was a weird note in the drawer of Kougami’s desk…” As soon as I open the file she sent, my heart starts pounding.

“The flowers scatter and butterflies go back to being scarce.”

That is the only sentence written on the notepad, it’s in reddish pink ink. It’s definitely Kougami’s writing. It looks like the azalea coloured ink that Imai gave her for her favourite fountain pen. I remember Imai’s face turning beet red when he learned that azaleas mean “temperance” and “the joys of love” in the language of flowers. But what matters most is what’s written. It sends a shiver down my spine.

“What is this… Chinese?”

Isozaki-sensei leans over me from the back seat. “Butterflies seldom return to scattered flowers… That’s what it means.”

“I see… It’s a stanza of Chinese poetry.”

I remember seeing this before.

“Feelings…”

Flowers open and butterflies fill the branches, the flowers scatter and the butterflies go back to being scarce. However, the old swallows still nest there. The land owner is poor, and yet they come back.

It’s part of a strange Chinese poem that Kougami noticed in the newspaper before. The email I got from her mom says that she has no idea what this is. I don’t think this has anything to do with running

away from home, but somehow, I understand it. This shows Kougami's resentment toward her coldhearted parents. She won't return to a branch without flowers. Could she be trying to tell me something, too? Perhaps I'm being told that the butterfly is closing in on me.

"…Maybe Kougami was caught by Hanabusa and forced to help kidnap Ii-chan." I have to force the words out of my throat. Sakurako-san glares at me.

"What makes you say that?"

"Because the delivery man said that when he made eye contact with the girl, she looked like she was asking for help. She might've been being watched by someone, so she couldn't ask for help more clearly." I then proceed to tell Sakurako-san about the strange Chinese poem in the newspaper.

She scolds me, asking why I didn't tell her before, but I didn't think it would really be connected to Hanabusa. Besides, it never occurred to me that Kougami would act on her own. She must have found some way to contact the person who submitted the poem to the paper. Then she was targeted while running away from home, and—

"When Utsumi-san's nieces and Yuuka-chan went to play at Sakurako-san's house before, Shouko-san and Kougami arrived in the afternoon, and we all had yakiniku together… Ii-chan and Kougami played together for quite a while, and grew close. They probably took advantage of that."

"Were they still in touch?"

"I don't know… But the fact that the message doesn't have a clear meaning indicates it was probably sent while the perpetrator was watching her."

Maybe her captor made her message back so it wouldn't seem suspicious. I send an inoffensive reply, just to check if the message will be marked as read. Just then, I receive another email from Kougami's mother. It's an image file that shows a single, black butterfly wing with a yellow stripe.

"So the butterfly really is…"

The inky black wing looks like a curse cast on the white paper. Isozaki-sensei sends the picture to Papillon Chateau, saying that even if it looks similar, it might be different from the Milionia basalis. The difference could be because of the sex of the specimen, or it could be an entirely different species. The one thing that's certain is that this means Hanabusa's reach has spread to Ii-chan and Kougami.

"I can't stand this. Why did Yuriko and Yuuka have to get wrapped up in this?"

"They could be bait to draw someone else out."

As for who that someone else is… I look at the faint reflection of Sakurako-san and myself in the window glass.

"Ugh, I can't get through to Minami." Sensei slams his phone down.

"Does she have a job? She might be in the middle of work."

"She quit her job at a yakiniku place on the second floor of the supermarket a month ago. I heard that she got a new job 2 weeks ago, but I don't know where."

Even if we try calling her parents' house, her mom probably won't know where she is right now. Her mom lives with her new boyfriend, so there's no place for Minami-san there anymore.

"As the boy said, she's probably working. Minami has nothing to do with this. Don't jump to conclusions. Yuriko and Yuuka are our top priority right now."

If only we knew why Ii-chan was kidnapped… For now, we head back to the Tominaga house. I'm hoping that the situation has changed, at least a bit.

"I'm glad you're here. I was just about to call you." Utsumi-san greets us at the door as soon as we arrive. He sighs with relief.

"Did you find her?"

"No…" Utsumi-san shakes his head.

We head to the living room. Naho-san and Ii-chan's grandma aren't there, but Souta-san is sitting on the couch, looking depressed.

"Did something happen?"

“Well… It seems like the husband knows something… It’s unlikely that she’s just lost. Help is coming soon.”

“So she really was kidnapped, then?”

Utsumi-san nods, then leads us into the hallway so he doesn’t have to explain in front of the family.

“…The husband seems to be with a woman other than his wife. I get the feeling it’ll be a bit of a pain,” Utsumi-san fills us in with a hushed voice.

Naho-san was completely shocked, and locked herself on the second floor. Her mother in law is desperately trying to comfort her right now.

“Well… It’s a personal issue for them, so I don’t want to say too much.” Utsumi-san starts speaking in a whisper.

It all started last spring, just before they took in Ii-chan. At the time, Naho-san and Souta-san had been undergoing fertility treatment for quite a while. Naho-san desperately wanted a baby, but deep down, Souta-san wasn’t so sure about it. Still, he continued treatment for the sake of Naho-san, as well as his mother who wanted grandchildren. Soon, the pain became unbearable.

One night, he made a mistake with a woman from the Sapporo head office while she was on a business trip to the Asahikawa branch where Souta-san works. For a brief time, he fell in love. His feelings soon changed to guilt, and Souta-san stopped contacting the woman. Still, he continued to receive one-sided messages from her. He tried changing his phone number and email address, but since they work for the same company, she was able to find out his new contact information.

Fortunately, Sapporo is 140 kilometers from Asahikawa. Even though he was unnerved by the woman’s obsession, she never did anything directly to him, and the amount of emails eventually decreased, so Souta-san was relieved. But in September of this year, she transferred to the Asahikawa branch.

“Apparently she got word that he adopted two children and that his wife is pregnant through their coworkers while talking about their families. She got angry, saying that she was ‘tricked.’”

Knowing that it was selfish to keep it a secret, Souta-san prioritized his own family. He told the other person that he loves his current family so he has to end the relationship and cut off contact with her.

“But I don’t know if the other woman thought their relationship was over.”

It’s been a week since he broke up with her and went no-contact. Actually, the moth wing showed up in his mailbox the day after he broke it off. That greedy, black wing. It’s like some kind of curse. Or maybe just anger.

I’ll destroy your happy family.

Then, the day after that, Ii-chan suddenly goes missing.

“Utsumi… There’s a good chance that Yuriko is involved in this kidnapping,” Sakurako-san says with a deep sigh.

“…What? You don’t think she kidnapped the kid… Do you?”

We don’t even know how she’s related to this, if at all. She might even be related to the woman Souta-san had an affair with.

“Anyway, her mom said that if she doesn’t come home by evening, she’ll file a search request. All we can do is follow any leads we have. For now, act like Yuriko has nothing to do with this.”

“But…”

“Sorry to say it, but I don’t completely trust you, Utsumi.”

“Huh?”

“You’re good at sweet talking, and you’re a little *too* nice. I still don’t know if that’s your real personality,” Sakurako-san says, ignoring the Tominaga family’s issues. Utsumi-san pouts.

She has a point, though. Utsumi-san is good at getting into peoples’ heads. I guess you could say he’s a natural smooth talker? I can’t think of many people who dislike him.

“So you seriously think I could be one of Hanabusa’s minions?”

“I didn’t want to have to say this to you, but I think it’s possible. You’re a softhearted person, so I think someone clever could easily sway you.”

“…” Utsumi-san’s expression is a complicated mixture of shock and confusion.

“Uh, I don’t think you’re that kind of person, okay? I think Sakurako-san just doesn’t have much trust in the police.” I quickly try to console him, but he just shakes his head and says, “it’s fine.”

“…Actually, I did a bit of investigating about the Hakodate incident last year… I know the culprit is dead, but I can’t just ignore it when Shou-chan ended up getting stabbed.” Utsumi-san ruffles my hair. “...This happened a while ago, but one of my coworkers went missing, and the trail dried up… It feels like it was being covered up or something. I’ve been told not to look into it anymore… So I think there’s some kind of ‘power’ at work here, like in the Satsuki Usubuchi case. Besides…”

“Besides what?”

“…You two probably already know about Detective Yamaji’s younger brother. Officer Yamaji suddenly resigned from the Mashike police division last month, and I haven’t been able to get in contact with him ever since.”

“What?! Yamaji-san?!”

I just ran into him last month. Why didn’t he mention anything about quitting the force…? I’m worried about Yamaji-san, but Ii-chan and Kougami are more important right now. Even with police help on the way, it’s still a serious situation.

“I know where you’re coming from. You can’t be sure that I’m not one of Hanabusa’s spies. I’ll investigate on my own, but will you let me know if you find anything? Take care of those two,” Utsumi-san says, patting Isozaki-sensei on the shoulder to comfort him. “She’ll be fine. Quit making that face, you look like you’re about to cry. It’s different from back then. Shou-chan, Kujou-san , and I are all here to help. I’m sure we’ll bring Yuriko-chan home safe.”

“I’m not about to cry!” Isozaki-sensei retorts.

“No, I get it. I know exaaaactly how you feel, Icchan.” Utsumi-san pats sensei’s shoulder before he leaves.

See? There's no way Utsumi-san could be one of Hanabusa's pawns. It's frustrating that we have to doubt everyone, even him. This isn't fair.

Part 6

Where should we look? What should we do? We don't have any clues to go off of.

"First, let's go over the situation," Sakurako-san says after we get back in the car.

It's already after 3pm. There's only about one more hour left before it starts getting dark.

- Ii-chan left her house at approximately 8:55am this morning to go to a nearby friend's house. She dropped off the homemade cookies, then immediately left her friend's house. After that, she likely headed to the park she often visits with her father to see the Great Pyrenees dog she gets along with.
- Since no witnesses saw her at the park, she was likely abducted before reaching it.
- At around 9:15am a delivery man saw a girl that matched Ii-chan's description getting into a car on the hill between the Tominaga house and the park. Ii-chan seemed to know the people in the car.

- Last night, Kougami said she was going to sleep over at her close friend Azechi's house, but she could not be contacted.
- Until the previous night, she had been talking back and forth with me over SNS, but then stopped responding to or reading any messages.
- She finally replied at around the same time Ii-chan is thought to have gone missing.

- She has been worried about her career and family for a long time.

- The wing of a black moth was left at the house of both Ii-chan and Kougami, who then disappeared.
- It's possible that Kougami was an unwilling contributor in Ii-chan's kidnapping.
- The woman Ii-chan's father had an affair with may have been after Ii-chan.
- Minami-san cannot be contacted.
- The culprit is the Milionia Basalis.

After buying a drink, a notebook, and a pen at the convenience store, we park in a large parking lot to write down what we know.

"What about that text she sent you?"

"Oh… The Chinese poem, and also that thing about the bird cage."

- Poem called Feelings.
- The little bird is in a soft cage.

Sakurako-san groans as I add to my notebook. "A little bird and a cage… Boy, do those words bring anything to mind? Yuriko might have been trying to tell us something."

"It definitely doesn't have anything to do with the movie we saw… I tried searching it online, but it doesn't seem to be the title of any particular work."

It sounds like a hint of some kind. Maybe she was trying to tell us about how Ii-chan was taken?

"But something soft wouldn't normally be suitable for confining something, would it?"

"If she was worried about Hanabusa knowing, then maybe it's a code…" Sakurako-san mutters while she opens a can of peach juice.

"Since the message was sent to Shoutarou, we can assume it was actually intended for Kujou-san. If I were Kougami, and I wanted to send a code to you, I'd make it something related to bones." Isozaki-sensei suggests, sipping his green smoothie.

"That's true. The word birdcage makes me think of the chest."

“Chest… Oh!” Even at a time like this, Sakurako-san is happy to talk about bones. “That’s right, the ribs are also referred to as the rib cage, or thoracic cage. That must be what the bird cage is referring to. The ribs look like cage bars, too, don’t they?”

The curved bones protecting the heart and lungs do remind me of a bird in a cage.

“But bones are hard, so why would she call it a soft cage?” Maybe she meant a birdcage wrapped in soft flesh?

“Hard… No, not necessarily,” Isozaki-sensei says, slowly shaking his head.

“The costal cartilage.” Sakurako-san grins.

“Let’s say she is talking about a rib cage and costal cartilage. What kind of hint does that give us?”

“Costal cartilage… Costal comes from costa, which refers to the ribs, but can also mean ‘side’ or ‘edge’. Costal also brings to mind the coast, so maybe she meant the seaside. It’s thought that the word roller coaster shares the same origin. Hilly roads are called ‘coasters’ because the slope of the hill is like the ‘edge of the ground’.”

“Roller coasters….?”

“Unfortunately, there aren’t any in Asahikawa right now.”

Now that the amusement park sections of Santa Present Park and Asahiyama Zoo have closed, there aren’t any places with roller coasters left in the area. But…

“No… There is a place with a roller coaster.”

Sakurako-san and Isozaki-sensei look at me in confusion.

“There is one, it just isn’t at a fair.”

“What do you mean?”

“It’s a road.”

There’s a road in the Nishigakura district that is often called “the roller coaster road” because of all the hills. I go biking there sometimes because it’s fun to ride up and down the hills. I remember that Kougami mentioned it recently, too.

“...There must be a rundown house somewhere along there, then,” Isozaki-sensei says.

“Huh?” I tilt my head to the side. “Um…. I’m not sure. There’s lots of farms… Maybe some of them have closed down?”

Sensei shrugs. “I thought that since she mentioned a rib (abara), there would be a rundown (abara) house there.”

“Oh…”

I’m surprised. Not only can Sakurako-san and sensei derive all these clues from one little hint, but it’s also amazing that Kougami could come up with it. I feel like Ii-chan must be safe, as long as Kougami is there with her.

Isozaki-sensei gets a reply from Papillon Chateau. He reads the email, then sighs.

“What’s wrong, Isozaki?”

“I just heard back about the wing that was found in Kougami’s room… It’s not from a Milionia basalis.”

They’re both black with a yellow band, but the position and shape of the bands are different. If you look closely, the wing from Kougami’s room has blue dots along the band, too.

“The wing from Kougami’s room is from a mourning cloak… So there are probably two criminals.”

Tension fills the space between us as Isozaki-sensei mutters those words. Sakurako-san silently starts the car engine, and slowly begins to drive. I thought we were going to the roller coaster road, but she heads toward Ii-chan’s house instead.

“Isozaki, you stay here,” Sakurako-san says after taking a long, deep breath. She parked in front of the strawberry lady’s house at the corner of the bottom of the hill that Ii-chan’s house is on.

“...What?”

“We need a liaison. Someone trustworthy has to stay behind in case something happens to us,” Sakurako-san says, looking over her shoulder to talk to him in the back seat. She points with her chin, indicating for him to get out of the car.

Isozaki-sensei puts his hand on the seatbelt, but doesn’t undo it right away.

“I think the thing that Yuriko and Yuuka have in common is us. I don’t think it’s a coincidence. If we’re the real targets, then those two will be in danger if we don’t go. But we’ll be in danger, as well. That’s

why we have to leave the most reliable person behind as insurance. I'm sure you'd do the same thing, if you were in my situation."

Isozaki-sensei stays silent for a moment while he considers it, glaring at the back of the driver's seat. "...I never thought someone like you would trust me, Kujou-san ," Isozaki-sensei soon says with a stiff laugh.

He probably means it sarcastically. Sakurako-san nods at him with an extremely serious expression.

"Yeah. At the very least you hate Hanabusa, so you won't be influenced by him, right? I thought about leaving the boy behind, but… In a situation like this, you'd be the most calm and competent."

"..."

"Well, even without individual preferences like if we get along, there aren't many people in this world you can trust… So please." Sakurako-san pleads with Isozaki-sensei to let her go. I know neither of them want me to go, but I have to save Kougami.

He hangs his head and presses his fingers to his forehead while letting out a deep sigh. "If I don't hear from you in 3 hours, I'm going to tell the police everything and have them look for you."

"Okay. I'm counting on you."

Sensei reluctantly gets out of the car and enters the Tominaga house, then Sakurako-san starts driving again. I'm glad to be alone with Sakurako-san again. It's definitely better to leave someone behind in case something happens, which is exactly why we called Isozaki-sensei here in the first place. Still, seeing how discouraged he looked made my heart hurt.

"I wish… He could have come with us."

"I know, but we have to prepare for the worst case scenario."

"The worst-... Don't say that!"

"Ah… Back then, I should have just brought Hector with me instead," Sakurako-san mutters regretfully. She must be talking about the time we dug up Futaba-san's body.

"Please don't say that. If you did, Kougami-"

"Unfortunately, it's likely that things won't go well here. Mourning cloak butterflies prefer the juice from rotting fruit, rather

than flowers. Their common name in most languages is related to death or mourning."

"Huh?"

"There's an old movie called The Collector. It's based off of a novel about the perverted love of a man who keeps a woman hostage. It starts with the criminal collecting mourning cloak butterflies in a jar. They're butterflies that represent death. It hints towards how the woman tries to escape several times, but ends up dying in the end."

"No way…"

I gradually start to understand what Sakurako-san means by that. Of course, that's just the worst case scenario that she's imagining. There's no way that Kougami and Ii-chan will end up like that. I won't let it happen.

Diavel shouts, "kill them!" I clap my hands to drown out the sound of his voice.

To be continued.